These Hands Could Hold the World

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These Hands Could Hold the World

by Keep_Looning

Summary

He wasn't supposed to die. Grandpa Roma was invincible, he was always there. It was all his fault.

Feliciano and Lovino are left to fend for themselves after the death of their beloved grandfather. They move in with lifelong friend Antonio Carriedo, and do their best to act like the adults that they are(n't).

High school sweethearts, angst, and enough fluff to kill you. This is a good ol' fashioned slice of life of a struggling little family, and how they learn to stick together through it all.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I’m so sorry.”

“My condolences.”

“He was a good friend, just let me know if you need anything...”

On and on it went, each sorrowful condolence sliding and disappearing off Feliciano’s skin as steadily as the pouring rain overhead. He felt as gray as the oppressive sky above, nodding apathetically as each well-wisher shuffled by muttering their quiet words of solace.

Feliciano slid his eyes shut, silently praying that everyone would just leave already. He just wanted to curl up and hide away forever, was that too much to ask?

Soon enough, almost everyone was gone. For a supposedly popular man, Roma’s funeral had a depressingly low attendance. Feliciano absently wondered if his own funeral would have a better turnout. He’d like to think so.

He looked up from where his eyes were previously fixed, the spot where he had just watched his grandfather lowered into the cold dirt below. Lovino stood quietly next to Antonio as he watched the retreating backs of funeral attendees rush to escape the rain.

“They could at least pretend to give a rat’s ass about the old man.” Lovino growled, though it lacked its normal bite.

“They cared enough to come stand in the rain for him, you should be grateful.” Antonio tried to reason.

Lovino simply *tsked* and gripped the umbrella a little tighter. Feliciano noticed his own vice-like grip on his umbrella and consciously tried to loosen it.

It didn’t work.

Now, Feliciano was usually the talkative one. He always flitted from one topic of discussion to another without preamble nor warning. In all his sixteen years he had never run out of things to say. That is, until that day.

Their grandfather had been sickly, slowly withering away. It was as if one day he was standing strong with endless zeal for life and a boundless smile on his face, and the next day he just faded away. His smile had become tinged with pain, and he became tired and old.

He wasn’t supposed to grow old, he was supposed to take care of Feliciano and Lovino forever. He had promised.

He had lied.

“Feli, you need to breathe.” Antonio’s calm voice broke through Feliciano’s dismal musings, and he released the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

He looked up at Antonio and floundered for something to say, a reassurance, anything to convey that *I’m fine, everything is fine.*

But everything was not fine, and they both knew it.

Feliciano opened his mouth to say something, anything, but as soon as he drew in a breath to speak, a broken sob came out instead.

He tried to choke back the sob, tried to make it stop, but it was a lost cause. Feliciano dropped his umbrella as he clutched his chest in desperation. In a flash, Lovino was in front of him and he wrapped him in a bone-crushing hold. It took a second of shocked silence, but Feliciano slowly lifted his arms and hugged back just as tight.

He buried his face in his older brother’s shoulder and let everything loose. Feliciano tried to speak, but it was questionable if he was even coherent.

Lovino just held tight and whispered sweet nothings in his ear. Feliciano could feel Antonio standing next to them, dutifully holding an umbrella above the brothers as their world fell apart under a crooked and dreary sky.

Feliciano pushed himself away when he was finally able to bite out a coherent sentence, “What do we do now?”

Lovino froze. He looked slowly up to meet Antonio’s own wide eyes, neither knowing what they could possibly say to dull the searing pain of heartbreak and uncertainty left behind in their beloved grandfather’s absence.

He audibly gulped and looked back to Feliciano’s wide, pleading eyes, “I don’t know.” The telltale sting of tears burned at Lovino’s eyes, but he held strong, “I don’t know Feli, but dammit we’re going to figure it out.” After a beat he added on desperately, “We have to.”

Suddenly overcome with righteous anger, Lovino broke, “Why’d you have to go and die old man! You weren’t supposed to, bastard. This is all your fucking fault!” he lamented to the tumultuous clouds above.

“Lovi, language.” Feliciano breathed out softly.

Lovino peered down at his brother who looked just the faintest bit amused. He let out a little laugh and grumbled out a half-hearted apology, “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Not like the geezer can tell me off now.”

Feliciano looked down when he was reminded of their loss, all semblance of his gentle teasing forgotten.

Lovino frowned, sighing heavily as he rested his chin on top of his brother's head, "Don't worry Feli, I'll take care of us. We'll be fine all on our own."

"Wait a minute, I'm not going to abandon you guys! We'll figure it out together." Antonio suddenly chipped in.

Feliciano looked up, almost forgetting that Antonio was still standing there. He was smiling brightly, resolve etched into his face as he stubbornly held the umbrella above the two brothers, getting soaked in the process.

For the first time that day, Feliciano felt something that wasn't grief stir in his chest. He gave his brother a tight squeeze before releasing him. He pulled himself up and approached Antonio, ignoring the fact that he was well and truly soaked through, and gave him a tight hug as well.

"Yeah," Feliciano said, tears drying on his face, "we'll figure it out together."

Chapter End Notes

Hey all, welcome to the jam. So this is totally self-indulgent. Just thought I would share, so maybe some other people could get some enjoyment out of it! I just headcanon Lovino to be a 'famiglia first' kind of brother, especially if they are left on their own.

I am open to any and all criticism, let me know what you think!

Expect fairly normal updates, I already have the next chapter almost done! It should be a bit longer than this, this is more of a prologue.

Okie dokie, thanks for reading, see ya next time!

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Oi, get your ass out of bed or you’re gonna be late!”

Feliciano groaned when he heard his brother’s muffled yell through the door. Heavy footsteps stalked down the hallway as Lovino made his way to the kitchen. He could hear Antonio laughing at Lovino’s predictably grouchy mood, and Feliciano couldn’t suppress the amused smile that overtook his features.

He fought his way out of bed, for once not daring to roll back over and sleep in as he was wont to do. Today was too important for that — he was starting at a new school, and he didn’t want to make a habit of showing up late (well, at least not this early in the school year).

After Roma’s death, Feliciano, Lovino, and Antonio all decided to move to the neighboring city for a fresh start. Even though they were young (Antonio being the oldest at twenty-one, while Lovino was only nineteen), they spent the summer learning how to be independent adults.

The moment that thought crossed his mind, a loud crash in the kitchen followed by a string of curses echoed throughout the apartment.

Guess we still have some learning to do.

Feliciano stood, avoiding the loose floorboards that would grab at his feet, and threw back his curtains. He immediately regretted the action as sunlight flooded his room.

He squinted through the window and looked down at the busy street below. They didn’t have a great view, only being on the fifth floor, but the old brick buildings surrounding theirs’ felt warm and familiar. They had only been living in their current apartment for a little over a month, but it already felt like a home.

Feliciano sighed, a rare feeling of contentment filling his chest. He turned back and began to dig through his old, weather-worn dresser for something decent to wear. He ended up with a simple pair of tight black jeans and an old red T-shirt that had most definitely belonged to Lovino at some point.

As soon as he was changed he crept his way down the hallway towards the kitchen, letting his hand absently trail behind him along the faded wallpaper.

“... fuck, are you serious? They must have added an extra zero by mistake.” Lovino’s hushed voice just ahead gave Feliciano pause.

“No, they raised the rent on us again.” Antonio’s voice came through next.

“Goddammit, they can’t do that!” whisper-shouted Lovino.

“They can.” Antonio said shakily. “I can always pick up another shift…” he trailed off contemplatively.

“Hell no, you work enough already. If anyone should pick up another shift, it’s me!” Lovino shot back.

“Lovi, I know how much you hate your job, I see how much it drains you. Let me do this.” Antonio said, doing his best to sound reasonable.

“You listen here -”

“Maybe I could get a job.”

Both Lovino and Anotonio whipped around, looking well and truly caught. Feliciano stood in the middle of the kitchen, loosely fidgeting with his hands as he waited for a response.

Antonio was the first to break out of his state of surprise, laughing nervously as he said, “Feli! How long have you been standing there?”

“Not long. I just heard you talking and I thought that maybe I could help chip in.” Feliciano shrugged.

“Absolutely not.” Lovino crossed his arm with a glare. “ You should focus on school, let us worry about this stuff.”

Feliciano groaned — this was not the first time that they’ve had this argument, “Come on *fratello,* we said we were in this together!” he pleaded, doing his best impression of a kicked puppy.

“Argh, don’t give me those eyes — no, Feli stop it.” Lovino said in his best *I-am-older-so-therefore-listen-to-me* voice. “You should focus on what you want to do when you grow up, what makes you happy. Leave the adult stuff to the adults.” Lovino said with all the finality he could muster.

Feliciano groaned in frustration, “What about you, then? You’re just as much a teenager as me, yet you act like you’re *so* much older.” He took a step forward, feeling uncharacteristically bold, “What about what makes *you* happy Lovino? What do *you* want to do?”

Lovino gave his brother a blank look, “All I want is for you to be able to grow up like normal. Make friends, go to school. *Be happy,* dammit.” His eyes bore into Feliciano until it registered what he had just said. “Ugh, this sappy shit is bad for my health” Lovino crossed his arms and huffily turned in his chair.

Antonio took that as an opportunity to jump in, “Feli, we can handle it, don’t worry! We’re all just a little tired. Now, do you want one or two pieces of toast?”

Feliciano sighed and let the subject drop for the time being, “One’s fine, *grazie.”* He said as he flopped down in the chair across from Lovino. He dug into his breakfast as Antonio began to brew the obligatory pot of coffee.

The kitchen settled into a comfortable silence, each lost to their own quiet musings. It wasn’t long until the coffee was ready, Antonio immediately pouring himself and Lovino a cup.

He sauntered his way over to where Lovino was still pointing his nose up childishly in the air, “Here you go, *cariño.”* Antonio purred as he set the coffee in front of the irate Italian.

Lovino, smelling the bitter aroma of the coffee, finally looked down at the mug in front of him. He inhaled deeply in contentment as he took a cautious sip, “Shit, that’s hot.”

“Well, what did you expect?” Antonio asked lightly.

Feliciano watched as his brother continued to take small sips of coffee. He looked like he needed it, the dark smudges under his eyes growing more pronounced by the day.

How did I not notice before?

Lovino, despite being only nineteen years old, worked as a bartender. Feliciano wasn’t exactly sure how his brother managed to pass himself off as of-age (after all, he was told that they could almost pass off as twins), but he suspected it had something to do with the constant scowl and biting words. His growling voice and scrunched up face tended to age him.

That and the fake ID he carried.

Lovino worked late into the night, and was in an almost constant state of exhaustion. Despite that, he managed to stay active and lively. Attitude notwithstanding, Lovino always made sure that everyone in their little family was taken care of, even at the cost of his own wellbeing.

Antonio finally took a seat at the table, sipping at his own cup of piping hot coffee. Lovino craned his neck to scrutinize the cup before scoffing, “Gee, would you like some coffee with your milk? Seriously, you’re going to ruin it bastard!” he whined.

“It’s too bitter, I don’t know how you can stand the taste. Plus, the milk helps cool it down!” Antonio said brightly, grinning mischievously as he poured even more milk in his coffee.

Feliciano laughed at his brother’s subsequent groan of distress. This happened every morning — Lovino growing increasingly distraught over the ruined coffee. It was normal. Comfortable.

“So Feli, new school today, yeah? Are you excited?” Antonio asked, completely ignoring Lovino's irritated grumbling.

“Sì! I’m excited to see what my new school is like!” Feliciano said in excitement, although there was an edge of anxiety apparent in his voice. “But I think I’m nervous too, I’m not sure.”

“What do you mean *you’re not sure?”* Antonio asked curiously.

“Well, my chest feels kind of tight, and I like meeting new people but…” Feliciano trailed off, trying to find the right words. “But what if I ruin it? What if they all hate me and I don’t make any friends?”

“Then I’ll kill them.” Lovino chimed in.

“No you won’t, Lovino, drink your coffee.” Antonio reprimanded. He turned back to Feliciano with a warm smile, “Feli, you are the bubbliest person I have ever met. They’re going to love you, don’t worry!”

Feliciano nodded, not entirely convinced. Despite his outgoing personality, he was prone to anxiety and he tended to second-guess himself. He had always been high strung — a result of a rather stressful childhood — and it had only gotten worse after Roma died. His anxiety had gotten in the way of friendships before, and he was determined not to let it happen again.

Feliciano looked down and started picking absently at his nails. He was excited about school, no doubt about it, but the lingering fear that he would somehow ruin their fresh start was stuck to the back of his brain. It was like a parasite, latching itself to his head until it became too big to ignore.

“Shit, I told you that you were gonna be late!” Lovino said suddenly, looking at the clock. “C’mon we have to get going.”

Lovino had promised that he would walk Feliciano to his school on the first day. He had made his brother promise after he worried himself silly that he would get lost.

Feliciano was quick to throw on his shoes and grabbed his backpack. Lovino dumped his remaining coffee into a to-go mug, as he also slipped on his shoes. Antonio started tidying up the kitchen before he moved to the door to say goodbye. He gave Feliciano a hug, and Lovino a light peck on the cheek.

“Bye, Feli! Good luck, you’ll do great!” Antonio said as they started to move out the door.

“Bye Toni, thanks! Have a good day at work!” Feliciano responded brightly.

Lovino gave a quick wave and closed the door behind them. They made their way out of the building and onto the busy street below. The school itself was only a few blocks away, easily walking distance.

It was a beautiful day out. The sky was blue, and birds sang loudly over the hum of a bustling city. Even though they lived on the outskirts, there were plenty of people rushing about, always trying to get to their destination faster. Pigeons pecked lazily at discarded food on the sidewalk as angry businessmen rushed by, aggressively talking into their phones.

“I was serious about killing them.” Lovino said after a few silent minutes of walking.

Feliciano laughed, “I know Lovi, thank you.”

They walked in silence for another block before they could see the school. Feliciano felt some of his anxiety return as he ran over all the ways things could go wrong in his head.

I'm going to trip and fall in front of everyone. Or maybe I'll accidentally insult the popular kids. Then I'll never make any friends! What if I bump into the principal and his wig comes flying off, oh God that would be so embarrassing! I'll have to move away, I would ruin our fresh start. Lovi would be so disappointed. What if —

His pointless loop of *what if's* was halted when Lovino stopped and turned to him, "Stop thinking so much, it's pissing me off."

Feliciano looked up and realized they were right in front of the school. The brick building stared imperiously down at him as he watched students filter in. To say he was intimidated was an understatement, and he had to fight the instinct to turn on his heel and retreat back to their warm, familiar apartment.

"You have your schedule, right?" Lovino asked shortly.

Feliciano nodded mutely.

Lovino sighed and turned to fully face him, "Look, I know this is a lot but I — uh — what I mean to say is," he stumbled awkwardly over his words, never particularly skilled in the art of reassurance. "I know you'll do fine, so stop worrying so much!" Lovino fought to maintain eye contact, embarrassed at having been caught saying *sappy shit* twice on the same morning.

Feliciano giggled, "Thanks Lovi, I love you too."

Lovino huffed, shooing his brother away, "You have your phone, Antonio should be here to pick you up. Unless the idiot forgets, in which case text him." He seemed to think about it before adding, "You know what, text me too so I remember to kick his ass if he forgets."

Feliciano truly laughed then and tackled Lovino in a hug, "I will. Have a good day at work."

With that, Feliciano broke away and made his way through the gates of his new school. It was time for his *fresh start* to really begin, and he was going to do everything he could to make his brother and Toni proud.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, two updates on the same day! Please don't get used to it, I would post the whole story in one day if I could!

Not much happens here, but I had a great time writing Lovino's character. I resonate with his sass on a personal level.

Next chapter is Feliciano's first day at school! Hopefully he doesn't ruin his 'fresh start,' the poor anxious baby.

Thanks for reading, as always I appreciate any criticism (even if it's not very nice, I appreciate honesty!).

Till next time!

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano pushed his way through the front doors of his new school, immediately recoiling at the boisterous crowd of rowdy teenagers. He looked around, feeling rather than seeing the barely-contained chaos that swirled around the students as they milled about before classes began. As it was the first day, Feliciano was able to blend in seamlessly with the churning crowd. In fact, there were a lot of new students who looked just as nervous as he did.

Feliciano pushed his normal bright smile on as he went up to introduce himself to some of the other obviously new students. But just as he was about to say something, the warning bell rang.

The chaos, which had been previously contained, was suddenly unleashed as students rampaged through the halls. Feliciano was caught in the whirlwind as he struggled to dig his schedule out of his bag. He pulled it out with a triumphant flourish, only to realize that he was the sole student left standing in the hallway. He flinched as the second bell told him he was late.

On his first day.

Great.

“Ask not for whom the bell tolls…” Feliciano muttered darkly to himself.

He sighed as he looked at his schedule, noting that his first class was history. He made his way down the hall until he found the correct classroom, bringing in a shuddering breath before pushing the door open.

“Dude, I’m telling ya, it’s like the law. If the teacher doesn’t show up then we can just leave!”

“Al, I don’t think that’s how it works.”

“It is, I swear! If the teacher doesn’t show, then why should I?”

“Because that, unlike what you’re trying to say, is *actually* the law.”

”Pssh, learn to live a little Mattie.”

Feliciano stood in shocked silence at the yelling. Nobody even saw him slip in, they were too invested with the rather one-sided shouting match.

Suddenly, the arrival of who could only be the teacher cut off the ridiculous argument. The first thing Feliciano noticed was just how old the man was. His hair was a stark white, and the wrinkles formed defined canyons on his face. Hell, he probably remembered most of the history he was going to be teaching.

“Alfred, sit down.” The man said, his voice far deeper than he expected out of the frail-looking man. “For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Mr. Everson. I have a seating chart already made. Come take a look and sit down in your assigned seat.”

Feliciano was pleased to note that his assigned seat was right next to the window. He sat silently, noticing with some trepidation that the boy who was previously yelling — *Alfred?* — plopped down in the seat to his immediate right.

“What a load of garbage, assigning seats already! And I just know he split me and Mattie up on purpose.” Alfred grumbled.

Feliciano looked over and saw that Alfred was looking at him expectantly. He responded in a small voice, “I’m sure it’s just a coincidence, I don’t think a teacher would go out of their way to do that.”

“Ha! Then you obviously haven’t met half the teachers here. Like the literature teacher, Mr. Kirkland. Man, talk about a stick in the mud!” Alfred’s remark made a few of the students chuckle lightly into their hands, Feliciano included.

The obnoxious teen seemed to preen under the attention, smirking to himself in apparent satisfaction. Feliciano felt himself loosen up around Alfred, the boy exuded joy and an innocent kind of childishness that gave him a certain charm.

“What about you, dude? I’ve never seen you here before, and I know everyone at the school!” Alfred said confidently.

Feliciano gave his million-dollar smile and said, “I’m Feliciano! My brother and I just moved here.”

Alfred smiled right back, “That’s awesome, dude! If you need anyone to show you around just say the word,” here he pointed at his chest and proclaimed, “after all, I’m the hero!”

Half the class groaned at that, no doubt used to Alfred’s antics. Feliciano, however, could feel the sincerity and nodded gratefully, *“Grazie,* I appreciate it.”

Alfred smiled brightly as their teacher motioned for the class to fall silent.

The class dragged on for its allotted time, most of the time spent talking about the syllabus and time frames for exams. Before Feliciano knew it, the bell was ringing and the whole class stood up to move to their next period.

Feliciano stared down at his schedule and tried to map out where to go next. Literature was his next period, with Mr. ‘stick-in-the-mud’ Kirkland — at least according to Alfred.

He looked up and saw Alfred glaring at a quiet-looking boy with a scarf. The boy simply smiled back softly at Alfred, which only served to make him scowl fiercer. Feliciano watched the staring match in confusion, but eventually reached up to tug lightly on Alfred’s jacket.

“I’m sorry, but can you show me where this is?” Feliciano asked, pointing at his schedule.

Alfred looked down to where he was pointing and nodded enthusiastically, “Yeah, no problem! I’m actually going there next, too.” Alfred said. “Oh man, if you thought Mr. Everson had something crawl up his ass and die, just wait until you get a load of Mr. Kirkland!” he laughed obnoxiously, clearly pleased with his own joke.

Feliciano smiled lightly as they made their way out of the classroom. Another boy who looked near identical to Alfred walked up to them.

“Hey Mattie! Meet my new friend, Feliciano. He just moved here and he’s got a funny accent, but I like it a lot. Feliciano, this is my twin Matthew. He’s quiet, but don’t let that fool you! He’s got more salt than the Dead Sea!” Alfred said all in one breath.

“Wow Alfred, so you do pay attention in geography. Also don’t be rude!” Matthew reprimanded sharply. Alfred simply laughed and rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s very nice to meet you.” Matthew said kindly.

“Nice to meet you!” Feliciano chirped happily.

Wow I already know two people at this school! Maybe I was panicking for no reason.

The three made their way to the next class, the twins bickering the entire way. Feliciano thought that they really were nothing alike. Alfred was loud and confident, while Matthew came across as timid and shy. But the longer they talked, Feliciano understood what Alfred meant by not letting Matthew’s quiet demeanor fool him. Matthew stood his ground the entire time, bickering with cool confidence. Alfred couldn’t seem to get a word in edgewise.

They finally made it to their next classroom, a disheveled man shuffling a pile of papers at the desk in the front. His whole body looked taut, like he was about to snap at any moment.

The second the bell rang the disheveled figure stood up ramrod straight and began speaking with a distinct British accent, “Good morning everyone. For those of you who don’t know me, my name is Mr. Kirkland. Please pick your seats wisely as they will be permanent. I can’t be bothered to make a chart. That is unless somebody,” Mr. Kirkland glared pointedly at Alfred, who tried (and failed) to look innocent, “forces my hand in the matter.”

Feliciano sat himself next to Alfred, who chose to sit in the back. Matthew sat on the other side of Alfred, and a tall blond sat on Feliciano’s left. He was going to introduce himself to the stoic blond when Mr. Kirkland started speaking again, “Alright, we are getting right into it today.”

The class groaned in despair, but Mr. Kirkland held firm, “What? There’s not a moment to spare. I have placed your textbook under your desk. Now please turn your books to page eleven, we are going to be covering the basics of fiction and what distinguishes it from other genres.” he said, flipping to the correct page in his own book.

The class plowed ahead dreadfully slow, only occasionally broken up by a witty comment from Alfred, and the subsequent reprimand from Mr. Kirkland.

Suddenly, Feliciano was jerked awake by the bell — he hadn't even realized that he had fallen asleep.

"What did I tell you, man, total stick in the mud." Alfred said, shaking his head slightly to himself. Feliciano felt inclined to agree with him.

He stood with every intention of introducing himself to the boy who had been sitting next to him, but he had already disappeared.

How did he manage to sneak out?

With a shrug, he resolved himself to simply introduce himself the next day.

After literature, Feliciano sat through geography and algebra before it was time for lunch. He dragged his feet as he found his locker and grabbed the bagged lunch. He had lost Alfred and Matthew a while back, having different schedules and all. That being said, Feliciano was left to face the school cafeteria all by himself.

Trying not to think of all the things that could go wrong, Feliciano followed the sounds of mindless chatter and laughter in hopes that he would find his intended destination.

When he did arrive, Feliciano immediately recoiled at the sheer amount of activity in the room. The smell of greasy lunches singed his nose, and the loud student body, most of them jostling for a position in line, created an oppressive cacophony of sound that seemed to pin Feliciano to the spot.

Feliciano was no stranger to public school, he knew the dangers a cafeteria posed to someone as anxious as him. His old school, however, had split the lunch periods up so only a third of the student body was in the cafeteria at any given time. This school, however, didn't get the memo.

His shoulders slowly scrunched up to his ears as he backed out of the large room. Try as he might, he just couldn't get himself to step forward.

Before Roma had died, Feliciano was able to quell the anxiety that prickled just under the skin. He used to talk more, laugh more. Now though, he felt like he couldn't breathe.

Roma was gone.

He had been their rock, a source of bravery and confidence for Feliciano. He suspected that when Roma died, so did his confidence. This just seemed to solidify the notion in his head.

I'm pathetic.

Alfred spotted Feliciano slowly backing out and started aggressively waving him over. Feliciano registered that Alfred was beckoning him forward. He panicked, turning to do the only thing that he knew without a doubt that he was good at:

He ran.

So pathetic.

Feliciano rushed back into the hallways, and away from the noise. He turned the corner and pushed his back against the lockers there. He breathed in deeply, trying to prevent the anxiety attack that was bubbling in his chest. He stood, suspended in time, before the sound of someone clearing their throat brought him back to reality.

Feliciano looked down in surprise when he spotted somebody sitting on the ground just a few feet away. He had a diminutive figure, black hair and a decidedly neutral expression. In front of him sat a box of what looked like rice and some other brightly colored foods, chopsticks gripped loosely in his hand.

Feliciano pushed himself off the locker and was about to apologize for intruding when the boy spoke first, “Are you okay?”

He froze, noting the slight accent. Was he alright? *Not really.* he thought, but what came out instead was, “Yeah, I’m fine! I just realized that I forgot my lunch is all, heh.” Feliciano finished weakly.

“What is that then?” The boy asked.

Feliciano wanted to throw his head into the locker as he realized that he had his lunch still clutched in his right hand, “Oh, would you look at that, I found it! Thanks, I won’t lose it again.” he rushed out quickly.

“I thought you had forgotten it, not lost it.” The boy said with a faint smirk.

“Ugh.” Feliciano moaned. He promptly gave up trying to explain himself as he leaned against the locker, sliding down until he was sitting on the ground.

“You don’t have to tell me what’s wrong, though you are welcome to join me.” The boy said kindly.

“Thanks.” he said appreciatively. “My name is Feliciano, by the way.”

“Kiku.”

“Nice to meet you.” Feliciano said softly.

He pulled out his lunch — a simple peanut butter and jelly sandwich with a bag of chips — and ate in silence.

The silence dragged on for the entirety of the lunch period until Kiku suddenly stood up, “I would suggest making your way to class, the bell is going to ring soon.” he said as he brushed off any wayward crumbs.

Feliciano nodded, turning to the quiet teen, “Thanks. I mean for letting me sit here and all. And not asking questions. Oh, and for warning me about the bell!” he rushed out, noting how Kiku seemed rather amused by his rambling manner of speaking.

“Any time.” Was Kiku’s simple response. As if on cue, the warning bell rang and the halls were quick to fill up energetic students.

Feliciano lost Kiku in the crowd, but resolved himself to talk to the quiet boy again some time.

Feliciano made his way through the last three periods of the day, each one dragging on longer than the last. He had Alfred and Matthew in his biology class, and he even spotted Kiku sketching silently in the back of their art class. Feliciano waved to him, and it was returned shyly.

By the time school was over, Feliciano was thoroughly exhausted. Despite the roller coaster of emotions he had felt throughout the day, he counted his first day as a success. After all, he did manage to meet three new people, none of which thought his presence annoying.

At least, I don’t think they were annoyed with me.

Feliciano sighed and went to stand outside, waiting for Antonio to meet him at the front. Antonio got off work at 3:30, and Feliciano was done at 3:45. It was pure luck that their schedules worked out as nicely as they did.

Feliciano saw Antonio approach, still in his work uniform. Antonio worked at a nearby café waiting tables, his uniform a simple pair of black pants with a tan T-shirt with the company logo printed on it.

“Feli!” Antonio exclaimed when he spotted him.

“Hi Toni.” Feliciano said back, lacking his normal enthusiasm.

“Somebody sounds tired. How was your first day?” Antonio asked with a warm smile.

“It was good! I made three new friends, and I don’t even have any homework today. We mostly went over the syllabus in every class.” Feliciano said brightly.

Antonio smiled and ruffled the younger’s hair. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Feliciano and Antonio made their way to the apartment, both exchanging stories on how their days went. The sun felt warm on their backs, and the air felt the clearest it had in a long time. Things had gotten off to a phenomenal start, and Feliciano felt hopeful for the future — a feeling that he had not felt in far too long.

Chapter End Notes

Woop, another chapter omfg I am on it today.

I hope I did these characters justice. I know Feliciano may seem less energetic than usual, but he'll get there!

As always, thanks for reading, any and all criticism welcome, I would love to make the story the best it can be.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first thing Feliciano noticed when he peeled his eyes open was that it was still dark out. He hauled himself up to a sitting position, looking around dazedly as he fought to gain his bearings. With a slight shake of his head he reached over and turned on his phone, squinting at his screen as he noted it was just after one-thirty in the morning.

He returned his phone to its place on the nightstand, instead turning his ear towards the door as he strained to hear any sign of what could possibly have woken him up. He listened carefully, but all was silent in the little apartment. Feliciano prepared to flop back on his bed, thinking that he was just imagining things, but a soft bang followed by a muffled curse gave him pause.

Oh, Lovino's home.

Feliciano rolled clumsily out of bed, shuffling tiredly towards his door and into the hallway. He walked in a daze towards the living room, figuring the hollow bang he heard was a result of his brother stubbing his toe on the couch — *again.*

Just as he suspected, Lovino was sitting on the couch nursing a jammed toe. Feliciano giggled at the predictability of it all, watching as his brother's head snapped up at the sound.

"Ha, ha. Yeah, very funny. Don't come crying to me the next time you slam your finger in the door." Lovino muttered.

"But Lovi, I only ever did that once." Feliciano teased as he emerged fully into the dark living room.

Lovino huffed in annoyance before two things dawned upon him at the same time: one, that Feliciano was awake at nearly *one-thirty in the damn morning,* and two, that Feliciano should absolutely not be awake at *one-thirty in the damn morning*!

"And just what the hell are you doing out of bed this late at night?" Lovino asked sharply, crossing his arms with a light glare.

Feliciano started to fidget, his teasing mood fading. He looked down before breathing out softly, "I heard you come home."

"And?"

And I missed you.

Despite living under the same roof, Feliciano didn't actually see his brother very often. Lovino's shift usually started around four in the afternoon, and was never home before one in the morning — most nights it wasn't until three or four until he was home. Late shifts meant

that his brother slept in far later than everyone else in the apartment, and then it was merely a few hours before he left again.

Lovino usually had Sundays and Mondays off of work, and the three of them made the most out of that time. But the fact that Feliciano could just see and talk to his brother in this moment meant far more than the sleep he was most definitely missing out on.

But Feliciano didn't know how to put all of that into words, so he simply looked at the ground and shrugged.

With a heavy sigh, Lovino let it go. Instead he relaxed, staring tiredly up at the ceiling as he dropped his head onto the back of the couch. Taking that as an invitation, Feliciano flew forward to join his brother on the couch, pushing himself into his side with a contented sigh.

They simply sat together for a long while, neither of them having nor needing any words to fill the perfect silence around them. The apartment was bathed in a cool black, the faint glow of the city lights filtering softly in through the windows as the ever-present hum of the city buzzed around them.

Feliciano's eyelids were growing heavier with every passing second, his breathing beginning to even out. He was prepared to drift off completely, but was jerked back from the precipice of sleep when Lovino suddenly asked, "How was school?"

It took Feliciano a few seconds to process what he was just asked, his sleep-addled brain struggling to formulate a suitable reply. He scrunched his nose up in thought, and after a substantial amount of time had passed, he was finally able to articulate his carefully thought-out response: "It was good."

Lovino snorted with an amused roll of his eyes, "Care to elaborate, or are you completely brain-dead at this hour?"

Feliciano swatted in his brother's general direction, his hand lightly smacking Lovino in the chest, "Don't be mean, Lovi. And school was fine. I met some new people, and I even stayed awake in most of my classes." he said with a proud smile.

Lovino's eyebrow quirked up, *"Most* of your classes?"

Feliciano rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, smiling nervously up at the accusatory tone, "Um… yes?"

Lovino just sighed and gently ruffled the younger's hair, "Whatever. As long as I'm not getting any angry calls from the school about your narcoleptic tendencies."

Feliciano was struggling to hold onto consciousness, his body as heavy as cement. He finally gave up the fight and slumped over, subsequently resting the entirety of his body weight on his brother. Lovino grumbled softly to himself, but made no move to get up. Instead, he ran a gentle hand through Feliciano's hair as his own body relaxed.

The rhythmic petting was almost enough to make Feliciano drift off right then and there, but the sound of his brother whispering something kept him from succumbing to the warm blanket of unconsciousness that threatened to swallow him whole.

He strained to hear what his brother was saying, noting distantly that he was mumbling swiftly in Italian. The words were whispered, almost too soft to be properly heard, but Feliciano was able to catch the last heartbroken phrase, "*Mi dispiace, fratellino mio.*"

Why is he sorry?

Feliciano had half a mind to force himself awake and demand to know what his brother meant by his words, but just as he was mustering the strength to pry his eyes open, Lovino started to hum soft and low.

It was a slow, somber tune that resonated deeply in his chest, and the way Feliciano was leaning against his brother had his ear pressed firmly against his chest. He could feel the tune reverberate throughout his body, the gentle melody feeling oddly familiar. Sleep was inevitable now, and Feliciano was powerless to stop it as he felt the tune lull him fully into a peaceful slumber.

Feliciano peeled his eyes open for the second time that morning, eyes bleary from sleep. He looked around in a daze, noting absently that he was curled up tightly on the couch.The sun shone obnoxiously through the window, a stark contrast from the soft glow of the city lights from last night.

Feliciano slowly sat up, feeling a blanket that definitely wasn't there when he fell asleep slide off his shoulders and pool delicately in his lap. He languidly stretched, reaching a hand up to try and rub his eyes clear.

The sound of dishes clinking together is what alerted Feliciano to another presence in the room. The living room was really just an extension of their kitchen, so it was of no surprise to Feliciano when he peered over the back of the couch to find Antonio starting their breakfast.

"Mornin'." Feliciano slurred as he tried to shake himself awake.

Antonio whipped around, fixing the teen with a smile that could rival the brightness of the sun, *"Buenos días!"*

Feliciano started at the energetic greeting, unable to fathom how anyone could be so lively this early in the morning. He looked around curiously, trying to spot the only missing member of their little family, "Where's Lovi?"

"He's in the shower, said something about not having the chance to change last night." Antonio shot the teen an amused smile.

"Oh, sorry." Feliciano looked down guiltily. He had been too tired to really contemplate his actions last night, but now that he was looking back, he realized that he had probably selfishly kept his brother up last night.

Antonio was suddenly jumping over the back of the couch to sit heavily next to the fidgeting teen, “C’mon Feli, stop looking so guilty!”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to keep Lovi up last night.” Feliciano said as he brought his knees up to his chest, holding them close.

Antonio fixed him with a light scowl of disapproval, “Feli, you know as well as I do that Lovi wouldn’t do anything that he didn’t want to.”

“I know, but even if that’s true, I knew what I was doing last night.” While not technically true, Feliciano couldn’t keep himself from feeling like he had done something wrong, his voice taking on an angry tone as he explained, “It was selfish of me to keep him up like that. Just because I missed him doesn’t mean I have the right to just fall asleep right on top of him!” he scowled at the wall, striking a close resemblance to the other Italian in question.

Antonio snaked an arm around Feliciano’s shoulders, rubbing soothing circles on his back as he said softly, “You know, he probably missed you too if he let you sleep on him without complaining.”

Feliciano deflated at that, the previous anger he had felt dissipating. Logically he knew that he was overreacting, but that didn’t cause the guilt to fade. This wasn’t just about last night, but all the times he had burdened his brother with his selfish wants — and Antonio too, for that matter. He was the only one that didn’t contribute anything to their little family, and he had no idea how to remedy that.

All I do is hold them back.

Feliciano’s head swirled with self-deprecating thoughts, his expression turning decidedly absent.

Antonio sighed when he noticed the shift in the younger’s mood, patting him twice on the back before standing to finish making breakfast, “You’re not selfish for wanting to spend time with your brother. You deserve a chance to have some time with him too, you know.”

Feliciano nodded, not entirely believing him.

Lovino emerged from the bathroom shortly thereafter. Water still dropped steadily from his hair and onto the faded T-shirt he wore, that defiant curl miraculously sticking up despite the water.

Antonio’s face brightened when he noticed his arrival, and he waltzed his way over to where Lovino was standing before pressing a sloppy kiss to his forehead, “Good morning, *amor,*” he said lowly.

Lovino scrunched his nose up in apparent annoyance as he twisted away, biting out a terse, “Coffee first.”

Antonio pouted, crossing his arms over his chest, “I didn’t know coffee took precedence over me.”

“You didn’t?” Lovino snarked back, pouring himself a cup of the coffee that Antonio had already brewed.

Lovino seemed content to ignore the pouting Spaniard in favor of his blessedly hot coffee. But when Antonio’s pout only became more pronounced, he finally took pity on him.

He set his mug of coffee down and marched over to where Antonio still stood, arms crossed and all. Without preamble nor warning, Lovino took Antonio’s face in both of his hands and pressed a surprisingly tender kiss to his lips. Antonio looked surprised for a split second before closing his eyes in apparent bliss.

Lovino pulled away slowly, seemingly suspended in the moment before he snapped back to reality. He huffed, turning on his heel to make his way back to the table. He cradled the coffee closely to his chest, a light dusting of red painted delicately on his face.

Antonio stood motionlessly in the middle of the kitchen with his eyes closed, a dopey smile plastered on his face.

Feliciano, having watched the whole exchange still sitting on the couch, felt a smile tug at his lips — it was rare to see that side of his brother.

That ridiculously happy smile didn’t budge from Antonio’s face as he finally snapped out of his trance, preparing the eggs for breakfast with an invigorated bounce in his step.

Feliciano realized that he had yet to make a move to get ready — he still had school to go to, after all. With that in mind, he made his way to his bedroom.

After he completed his morning routine, he sat himself down at the table where Antonio promptly placed a plate of eggs in front of him.

Feliciano looked up from his plate and was disheartened to note that his brother was starting to nod off where he sat. Antonio must have noticed too, because he gently removed the cup of coffee from his hands lest he spill it on himself.

Lovino looked up when he noticed that the mug he was blankly sipping from was no longer there, “What are you-”

“Up you go!” Antonio cried as he scooped the exhausted Italian up and out of his seat.

“Antonio, what the hell?!” Lovino shrieked. “Where are you taking me?!”

Antonio cradled him to his chest, already beginning to walk away as he said brightly, “To bed, where you are going to sleep before you pass out on the table.”

“No way in hell, I still have to walk Feli to school, dumbass.” Lovino protested weakly, obviously too tired to put up a proper fight.

Feliciano took that as his cue to jump in, “Actually, I can walk on my own today.”

Lovino stopped his squirming, looking conflicted, “Are you sure? I don’t mind walking with you, it’s not that far.”

“Exactly,” Feliciano said with a sharp nod. “It’s a nice day out today, and like you said, it’s not that far of a walk. Seriously, Lovi, get some sleep.” he pleaded.

Lovino weighed his options, eyes flitting from his brother to the hallway where his warm bed was waiting for him. He flopped his head heavily on Antonio’s chest, “Fine. But text me when you get there.”

“I will, promise!” Feliciano said sincerely.

With that, Antonio spun on his heel and went to lay the irritable Italian down, “Bye Feli! I’ll be there to walk you home when you’re done!” he called over his shoulder, disappearing down the hall and into their shared bedroom.

Feliciano waved goodbye even though he knew that neither Antonio nor his brother could see him. He breathed in deeply as he slid on his shoes, grabbed his bag, and walked out the door.

He left his untouched breakfast to cool on the table.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why, but I really enjoy writing interactions between Lovino and Feliciano. Maybe it's because I also have a brother, but writing dialogue between the two comes so naturally. Hopefully it reads as nicely as it felt to write!

Anyway, thanks for reading! As always, I appreciate any kind of feedback.

Till next time!

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before Feliciano even opened the door to his history class, he could hear the shouting. He pushed the door open, entirely unsurprised to find that the shouting belonged to Alfred. The rowdy American was standing on his toes, chest puffed out as he did his absolute best to make himself look bigger than the obviously taller boy that peered lazily down on him.

Feliciano noticed that the boy Alfred was yelling at was the same one who he had been sharing heated looks with the previous day. The boy had platinum blond hair and, like yesterday, was wearing an old, well-worn scarf. He wore a sharp smile, somehow able to make the pleasant expression seem menacing.

“Give it up Ivan, I know it was you!” Alfred snarled.

Ivan kept that saccharine smile fixed firmly in place, “But whatever do you mean, Alfred?”

“Somebody threw that note at my head, and it couldn’t have been anybody else! You were smiling right at me!” Alfred shouted, thoroughly convinced in his own logic.

“Oh, that note!” Ivan suddenly gasped. “*Da*, that was me.”

“So you admit it!” Alfred shouted.

“*Da*,” was Ivan’s pleasant response.

Alfred didn’t seem to know what to do with the admission. He glared, obviously expecting more of a fight than what he was given. He floundered for something to say before settling with a dismissive, “Whatever.”

Alfred sat heavily in his seat, looking like he had just lost the one-sided shouting match despite getting the admission of guilt he was looking for.

Feliciano approached cautiously, trying to gauge just how upset he still was, “Are you alright?”

“Peachy.”

“You said that he threw a note at you?” Feliciano asked curiously.

“Yeah, he even admitted it, too. He’s never admitted to messing with me before.” Alfred said, looking perplexed.

Feliciano sat down next to him, “Well, did you read the note?”

“Huh?” was Alfred’s eloquent response.

“You said he threw a note at you, I assumed he said something mean.” Feliciano said with a touch of exasperation.

“Oh!” Alfred looked down at the crumpled note in his hands. “I, uh, actually didn’t read it?”

“Why not? Maybe he was saying something nice this time!” Feliciano said, ever the optimist.

“Pssh, fat chance. Me and the commie bastard have never agreed on anything.”

Feliciano looked on in disapproval, “You should still read it.”

Alfred released a long-suffering sigh, “Fine, whatever.” He glared once more at the crumpled note before unwrinkling it. Before he read it, he shot a fierce glare at Ivan who just smiled pleasantly back. He turned back in his seat, teeth grinding, before he looked down and read the note.

Feliciano watched in astonishment as Alfred's face went from angry, to mildly annoyed, before finally landing on confusion.

He gripped the note a little tighter as he kept reading, face flushing red. Without a word, he folded the note up neatly and shoved it in his pocket.

“What did it say?” Feliciano asked curiously.

But Alfred refused to speak, instead fixing his gaze straight ahead. Even by the end of class, Alfred hadn’t said a word about the ordeal, but he did keep sneaking confused glances at the Russian. Feliciano shrugged it off, figuring it had just been an insult and nothing more.

Alfred was still acting weird as they made their way to literature class, yet he still refused to share the contents of the mysterious note.

Feliciano once again shrugged it off, sitting silently in the same place as the previous day. Mr. Kirkland wasn’t in the room when they got there, which left Feliciano to sit idly by as Alfred whispered lowly with Matthew.

Feliciano tapped his finger lightly on his desk in boredom, having nothing to do until class got underway. However, he halted the incessant tapping as the blond from yesterday walked in and sat down next to him.

He was big. Not tall, necessarily, just built. His hair was carefully slicked back, and everything about him seemed like it was meticulously fretted over — from the way he sat with near perfect posture, to the way he straightened everything on his desk into a precise formation. He stared ahead with bright blue eyes, not making any move to acknowledge the jittery class.

Feliciano felt that worm of anxiety creep through his stomach as he worked up the courage to introduce himself. He shook his head to himself, swallowing the nervousness he felt before saying cheerfully, “Hi! My name is Feliciano. I meant to say hi yesterday, but Mr. Kirkland is kind of scary and I didn’t want him to yell at me.”

The teen glanced over at him, probably shocked by the abrupt introduction. He stared curiously at Feliciano's smiling face, "I'm Ludwig."

While he hadn't gotten a smile out of the stoic blond, he at least had a name to work with now, "Ludwig — that's a nice name!"

Ludwig looked away awkwardly, muttering a quiet, "Thanks."

Feliciano wasn't exactly sure what to say after that. He had introduced himself successfully, and normally he would leave it at that. He knew that he couldn't force somebody to be his friend, and Ludwig obviously wasn't going to contribute anything else to the conversation.

Maybe he thinks I'm annoying. Feliciano thought worriedly.

He had been told that he was annoying — that he talked too fast, laughed too loud, cried too much. But when Feliciano looked down to where he was picking at his own nails, he noticed out of the corner of his eye that Ludwig's hands were fidgeting nervously in his lap.

Oh, so he's shy. Feliciano realized. *I can work with that.*

Deciding not to push any more for the time being, Feliciano sat quietly for the final few seconds before their teacher came barreling in. Oddly enough, Mr. Kirkland was muttering about a "damn frog," whatever that meant.

Feliciano jumped just the slightest bit at the sound of the bell. He had fallen asleep yet again to Mr. Kirkland's droning voice, and Feliciano raised both arms above his head in a languid stretch. He hadn't realized just how tired he truly was, having gotten up in the middle of the night to talk to Lovino.

Feliciano felt a wave of guilt crash over him.

I hope he was able to get some sleep, no thanks to me.

He scowled to himself as he gathered his things, his mood having plummeted. Ludwig stood from his seat next to him and also began gathering his things.

Feliciano, now effectively lost in the fog of his own self-destructive thoughts, didn't notice when his pencil rolled lazily off his desk — but it seemed somebody did happen to notice.

Ludwig picked up the fallen tool and cleared his throat to get Feliciano's attention. But the Italian was too lost in his own head to hear it.

The blond battled silently with himself, finally mustering the strength to reach over and lightly tap on Feliciano's shoulder.

Feliciano yelped in surprise, whipping around to see who had disturbed the fog he was lost in.

Dio, I really must have zoned out there.

He was shocked to meet a pair of beautiful blue eyes, Ludwig standing awkwardly with a vaguely worried look on his face, “You dropped this.” he held out the pencil in front of him, unable to maintain eye contact.

Feliciano took it from him with a warm smile, “Thanks! My brother always tells me that I’m clumsy.”

Ludwig simply nodded, “It’s not a problem.” Without another word, he picked up his remaining things and hurried out the door.

Feliciano was left staring curiously after him, pencil gripped loosely in his hand.

Lunch soon rolled around, most of the students pushing roughly past each other in a desperate scramble to buy their lunches. The cafeteria was bound to be full already, and Feliciano didn’t even bother trying to force himself into the clamorous room. Instead he made his way to where he had eaten lunch the previous day, hoping to run into Kiku again — the boy’s calming presence seemed to mollify his anxious spirit.

He let out a relieved sigh when he turned the corner and saw Kiku already sitting with his lunch neatly spread out before him. He looked up when Feliciano approached, offering a small wave which was enthusiastically returned, “Hey Kiku! How’s it going?”

“I’m doing well, thank you. How are you?” Kiku asked politely.

“I’m good! I fell asleep in Mr. Kirkland’s class again, but that’s okay. I probably didn’t miss anything.” Feliciano said confidently.

Kiku shook his head in amusement, turning his attention back to his lunch.

Feliciano looked down at his own lunch and pulled out the same meal as yesterday, “Hey Kiku, I have a question.”

“Mm-hm?” Kiku hummed in response.

“Do you know a boy here named Ludwig?” Feliciano asked as he dug into his lunch.

Kiku sat in silence for a few seconds, seemingly trying to place the name to a face. His eyes suddenly lit up in recognition, turning his gaze back down as he said, “I think so. Blond hair, German accent?”

Feliciano nodded excitedly.

“Then yes, I think I know who you’re talking about. Why do you ask?” Kiku asked with a curious tip of the head.

“Well I tried to talk to him today in class, but he didn’t seem to want to talk to me. I thought that maybe I was being annoying again, but I think that he might just be shy,” Feliciano rambled. “He looks kind of scary, but he picked up my pencil that I dropped, which was

really nice! That's why I think he's just shy and why I want to try and be his friend!" he finished with a bright smile.

Kiku nodded, "I think that would be very nice of you."

The two spent the duration of lunch at ease, the silence frequently interrupted by a sudden remark or anecdote from Feliciano. Kiku didn't seem to particularly mind, nodding along to every story and occasionally sharing his own opinion.

But all too soon the peaceful period had to come to an end. Feliciano stood up, reaching a hand down to help Kiku up as well.

Kiku looked up at Feliciano's outstretched hand, slowly reaching up to grab it. Feliciano hauled him up, causing him to stumble forward. Feliciano laughed as he steadied him, "I want to be your friend too, Kiku."

Kiku looked dumbfounded for a moment before the expression melted into a look of extreme gratitude, "*Hai,* I would be honored."

When the bell rang the two friends navigated the hallways together, Kiku listening attentively as Feliciano chattered mindlessly the whole way.

Chapter End Notes

I was going to add more, but that seemed like such a wholesome end!

Anyway, next chapter should be up soon. I have like a ton of ideas that I would like to get rolling on. Hopefully nobody's too OOC, but I mean we all knew Ludwig was one shy dork.

Anyway thanks for reading. As always, any feedback welcome.

Till next time!

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio was there to meet Feliciano at the front gate again, the teen running to grip him in a tight hug, “Hi, Toni! How was work?”

He pulled out of the hug, fixing Feliciano with a mischievous grin, “Oh, you know, dazzling old ladies with my boyish charm.” he shrugged with a cheeky wink, “Just the usual.”

Feliciano giggled, “You know, Lovi would beg to differ. I think I heard him saying that you had the ‘charm of a potato,’ or something.” he teased.

Antonio scoffed, feigning hurt, “I’m wounded! After all these years I thought I had finally been upgraded to at least ‘charm of a tomato.’” He gripped his chest dramatically, “At least I know he actually *likes* tomatoes!”

Feliciano shook his head sympathetically, patting Antonio on the shoulder before saying in a resigned voice, “Maybe one day.”

Antonio looked at him incredulously. Feliciano fought to keep a straight face, trying with all his might to hold onto that serious demeanor. But in the end, it was a lost cause as he burst out laughing. Antonio was soon joining Feliciano in his mirth, both laughing like maniacs at the front of the school.

They turned to walk down the sidewalk, both giggling sporadically as they soaked up the light atmosphere. Feliciano was in particularly high spirits, the rest of his day having flown by smoothly.

His last last period happened to be P.E., though it had been treated more as a silence study hall since they were still assigning uniforms and lockers. Feliciano had noticed that Ludwig was in the class with him, but he had never gotten the opportunity to talk to the stoic blond.

“So how was your day?” Antonio asked when he was finally able to talk without dissolving into a fit of giggles.

“It was good! I got to sit next to my friend Kiku in art class. He’s really good at drawing, everything he draws looks so cute!” Feliciano said in delight.

Antonio smiled brightly, “That’s good to hear! And your other classes are going well too?”

“Yeah, I even met a new person. He’s kind of shy, but I’m going to try my best to be his friend!” Feliciano said with conviction. He had watched Ludwig in the halls and in class, noticing that he never seemed to talk to anyone. Feliciano was determined to at least be a friendly face for the shy teen, even if their relationship never went beyond that.

“Good for you, Feli. I’m proud of you!” Antonio said earnestly, ruffling his hair as they walked.

Feliciano positively beamed in response.

They finally made it back to their stuffy little apartment, flipping on the light as they made their way fully inside.

Antonio sighed in apparent relief as he walked into the kitchen, finally able to relax after a long day at work, “So, what would you like for dinner? I think we have enough for spaghetti.” he said with a faint smirk, already knowing that Feliciano would never refuse a pasta dish.

“That sounds good!” Feliciano said excitedly, throwing open the cabinets to retrieve the necessary ingredients.

The cabinets creaked open to reveal a disturbing absence of food. The cabinets were almost empty — the shelves depressingly bare, though not for lack of shopping. They had been struggling for money for a while now, yet they still managed to scrape by. But Feliciano knew that it wouldn’t last — not when their rent was being hiked up.

With a deeply unsettled feeling in his chest, Feliciano reached a shaky hand up to retrieve the spaghetti noodles. He closed the cabinet, cringing when the rusty hinges squealed in distress. Antonio was already standing over the stove, bringing a pot of water to boil.

Feliciano remembered how tired his brother looked that morning, but he only now noticed just how tense Antonio seemed to move. The Spaniard always moved like he was dancing, like there was always some unheard song guiding his actions. But lately that song seemed absent, or at the very least subdued.

“Hey Toni?” Feliciano asked quietly.

“Mmm?”

“Are you sure I can’t get a job?”

Antonio froze, his gaze fixed on the still pot of water below him. It seemed as though all the air in the room had been sucked out, the question hanging heavily between them. Antonio's shoulders tensed, and he didn’t turn to face the teen when he breathed, “You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”

Feliciano shook his head, “Sorry.”

The tension in Antonio’s shoulders was suddenly released as he turned with a heavy sigh. His face scrunched up worriedly as his eyes shifted from Feliciano’s guilty expression, to his fidgeting hands, and finally to the depressingly bare cabinet behind him. Antonio drew in a shaky breath, “Feli, I-”

“I just don’t want to be a burden anymore.” Feliciano breathed out quietly, almost to himself.

Tears instantly gathered at the corners of Antonio's eyes as he stumbled back to sit heavily at the table. He buried his head in his hands, groaning in distress.

Feliciano reached a hand out before pulling it back to his chest. He opened his mouth, intent on taking back the words that had obviously hurt him, when Antonio let out a pained little laugh, *"Lo siento* Feli, we never wanted you to think you were a burden."

Antonio dragged both his hands down his face, scrubbing at his eyes. The look he gave Feliciano when he finally peered up made the teen wish that he had just kept his mouth shut.

His eyes were tinged red, the smile he pasted on looking more like a grimace. Feliciano felt his heart ache when he noticed Antonio's bottom lip quiver almost imperceptibly, and yet again that crushing sense of guilt crashed down all around him.

I should have just shut up. I put that look on Toni's face.

Antonio breathed in deeply, though he couldn't completely cover the slight shake in his voice when he said, "If it's what you really want, I can talk to Lovi."

Feliciano audibly gupled, nodding his assent. Although the guilt he felt about making Antonio sad was tremendous, he knew that he would feel infinitely worse if he didn't find some way to contribute to their family. If he wanted to get through to Lovino, then he needed Antonio on his side.

With a final swipe at his eyes, Antonio hauled himself up. The smile on his face was much more genuine as he tried to hide the heartbroken look, "I think the water is boiling now, can you hand me the pasta?"

Feliciano swallowed around the lump in his throat, running forward to wrap Antonio in a tight hug, *"Grazie."*

Antonio brought his arms up to return the hug, paying no mind to the quickly evaporating water bubbling softly on the stove.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, I know. But I wanted to get this up before I went to bed.

I almost feel bad about the amount of angst I am putting some of my favorite characters through. But hey, C'est la vie.

Feedback is never expected, but always appreciated.

As always, thanks for reading!

Till next time.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Predictably, Lovino did not take well to Antonio siding with Feliciano — the teen once again eavesdropping in the hallway. He sat concealed by the shadows just around the corner where he was sure the feuding couple wouldn't see him.

"So you're on his side now?" Lovino growled, voice tinged with betrayal. "He should be focusing on school, not worrying about money. Dammit, Antonio, he's just a kid!"

"And what are we then, Lovino? 'Cause we sure as hell aren't adults!" Antonio shot back, sounding more heated than Feliciano had ever heard him. "He thinks he's a burden — we made him feel that way! Besides, it's pretty normal for a teenager his age to have a part-time job anyway," he finished as he crossed his arms.

Lovino slammed his hand down on the table with a resounding *bang.* The sound made both Antonio and, unbeknownst to either of them, Feliciano flinch. He rushed his hands to his mouth in a desperate attempt to muffle the subsequent squeak of surprise.

"I don't give a damn! When Roma died, I promised that *I* would take care of him. *Me.* I won't let him pick up the slack of my obvious failure!" Lovino shouted, chest heaving.

"This isn't about you, it was never about you!" Antonio threw his arms in the air. "You think you're protecting him, but you're not."

"How would you know? You told me you would *protect* us from that asshole of a father all those years ago, remember? *Great job* with that, by the way." Lovino snarled viciously.

Feliciano felt the air rush out of his lungs at the mention of their father. His hands began to shake as he grabbed at his chest, trying to remember how to breathe. The argument was getting to be too much for him, bringing back memories that he would rather keep locked away. Instead, he tried to focus on Antonio's reply when he realized that the kitchen had been infected with a taut type of silence.

"That's a low blow, Lovino." Antonio growled, the soft delivery only making the venom that laced the words even more potent.

Lovino must have realized that he crossed a line because he visibly tried to calm himself down. After many tense moments of ragged breathing and many aborted attempts to speak, he was finally able to grit out, "I know, it wasn't your fault what happened. I was just angry."

Antonio snorted, "Really? I didn't notice."

Lovino looked a little sheepish at that. Despite his attempts to get a hold of his explosive temper, it still tended to get away from him.

Antonio relented when he saw how Lovino deflated. He sighed before saying in a much more reasonable tone of voice, “Look, I know you just want what’s best for him — believe me, I do too — but dictating what he can or can’t do is only going to hurt him in the end.”

Lovino was quiet for a long time, fidgeting awkwardly as he tried to piece together a response. At many points he opened his mouth just to close it again. Finally, Lovino sucked in an uneven breath and said in the smallest voice Feliciano had ever heard from him, “I know that. *I know that,* dammit! I just thought that I could be enough for him, for all of us. But I fucked everything up, just like always.”

Feliciano couldn’t see him clearly from his current position on the ground, but the way Lovino brought his hands up to swipe at his eyes told him enough to know that his brother was dangerously close to breaking.

Antonio’s face dropped, all the previous anger having drained from him the instant Lovino had uttered those anguished words. He rushed forward, putting his hands on Lovino’s shoulders as he forced their eyes to meet, “Lovino, you are enough. Nobody expects for you to do this on your own.” He tightened the grip on his shoulders in a desperate attempt to relay his sincerity, “I meant it when I said that we would figure it out together, so please don’t try to carry this weight all on your own.”

Lovino dove into Antonio’s chest, finally letting himself break down. Antonio just held him as he ran his fingers through his hair whispering, “I’m so sorry I never noticed, *cariño.*”

Feliciano shakily stood up and padded quietly to his room. He never realized just how much pressure Lovino put himself under since Roma died. As Feliciano silently got ready for school, he resolved himself to pay more attention to the needs of their little family. After all, they were in it together.

Feliciano walked to school alone. He had miraculously managed to avoid running into Lovino or Antonio on his way out, a feat he was rather proud of if he was being honest with himself.

I’ll just send Lovi a text telling him that I left.

Feliciano texted as he walked, still feeling shaken. He hoped that he didn’t look as bad as he felt, but judging by the way his eyes burned and the vicious way he was picking at his nails, he wasn’t about to hold his breath.

He walked on in a daze, coming to the startling realization that he had definitely zoned out when the school seemingly materialized in front of him. Feliciano sighed when he came to the conclusion that this was going to be one of his bad days. Roma had taught him to manage days such as these — as a kid, bad days were more common than not — but when he died it seemed a lot of his progress was forgotten.

At least it’s a Friday.

Feliciano had thought it was weird for the school year to start on a Wednesday, he even complained about it at first. Now, however, he was infinitely grateful.

Feliciano pushed his way into the school, ambling his way to class trapped in a daze. He was early, so he sat down in his assigned seat and stared listlessly out the window. There wasn't much of a view — only a few trees spotted here and there on the school's campus before giving way to faded buildings and uneven sidewalks.

Time passed oddly, Feliciano's hazy mind refusing to accurately define what was reality and what was his own skewed sense of perception. It could have been hours, or maybe just seconds for all he knew, before other students started to file in. Among the students that came in was Alfred, arguing loudly with a much calmer Matthew. Feliciano couldn't tell what they were arguing about, but it was obvious that Alfred was losing.

The rowdy teen was desperate to get a word in edgewise, so when he spotted Feliciano sitting silently in his seat, he was quick to rush over, "Feliciano, my man, just who I was looking for!"

Feliciano looked up at him blankly, his face twitching imperceptibly when he continued to gesture wildly with his hands.

But Alfred had yet to even look at the Italian, so his state of detachment went unnoticed, "So basically Mattie and I were having this argument, and I need you to take my side. So basically, he says that…" the American trailed off when he finally let his eyes drift to Feliciano's face. He was surprisingly good at reading the atmosphere, and right now the air around Feliciano felt *wrong,* "Hey dude, are you alright?"

Shaking his head, Feliciano plastered a painfully fake smile on his face, "Yeah, I'm fine! Why?"

Alfred just gave him a pointed look and said, "You look… off."

Matthew, to Feliciano's extreme relief, elbowed Alfred harshly, "Don't be rude, Al! C'mon, I know you haven't finished that worksheet for bio."

"Ah, shit! How do you always know when I don't do my homework?" Alfred whined, Feliciano forgotten for the time being.

"If you haven't noticed, we live in the same house. You know, me being your *twin* and all." Matthew shot Feliciano an exasperated look while he coaxed Alfred to start working on his homework.

Feliciano offered a much more genuine smile in appreciation, returning to stare indifferently out the window.

His gaze remained fixed out the window for the duration of the class. The leaves rustled softly in the wind, and Feliciano noticed with a detached sort of interest as one of them broke free — twisting and dancing in the air as it flew away. It was the bell that broke him out of

his quiet musing. He gathered his things, silently making his way out the door without waiting for Alfred or Matthew as he usually might have.

He made it to the next classroom and sat down as he waited for Mr. Kirkland to start class. Nestling his head comfortably in the palm of his hand, and with no windows to stare out of, Feliciano contented himself to just stare at a fixed point on the wall.

Lost in his stupor, Feliciano didn't even notice when Ludwig took a seat next to him. The blond was shooting him vaguely worried glances, but Mr. Kirkland launching into his droning lecture caused him to turn in his seat and endure the lesson (the teacher wasn't even aware that he was putting half the class to sleep).

"... so that's the gist of the assignment, any questions? No? Alright then, partner up and get a plan started." Mr. Kirkland finished what was no doubt a lengthy explanation. But Feliciano didn't hear a word of it, too lost in thought about how he could be better for his brother and Antonio.

The class had promptly broken off into pairs, loudly discussing anything that wasn't their assignment. With a start, Feliciano broke out his hazy thoughts, looking around as he tried to figure out what he missed.

To his side, Ludwig cleared his throat. Feliciano turned to see what he wanted, noticing the blond was loosely fidgeting with his hands, "Would you like to be my partner for this assignment?"

"Huh?" was Feliciano's articulate response.

The nervous demeanor that Ludwig had gave way to one of slight exasperation, "Were you even paying attention?"

Feliciano looked away sheepishly, "Uh, yes?"

Ludwig sighed, crossing his arms with a stern look, "We are to split up in pairs and pick an overused cliché that is commonly used in fictional works and create our own short story centered around it." he delivered the instructions concisely, not a word out of place.

Feliciano slowly nodded in understanding, "And you want to be partners with me?"

The previous confidence seemed to fade, "Well everyone else already has somebody to work with so…"

"I'd love to work with you!" Feliciano sang brightly, his previously dour mood forgotten for a blessed moment. He flipped open a notebook and scribbled on a piece of paper, tearing it off before handing it to the blond, "Here, it has my number on it.".

Ludwig took the slip of paper, folding it neatly before placing it carefully into his pocket. He looked like he was going to say something, but the shrill ringing of the bell cut him off.

Feliciano began gathering his things, addressing Ludwig before he could leave, "How about we go to the library this weekend? I haven't been there yet, but I bet we could get a good start

on this project."

Ludwig nodded, "*Ja,* that sounds like a good idea. I will confirm a time with you later."

Feliciano couldn't help but smile softly at the blond's stern way of speaking, "I'll look forward to it!"

And with that, he breezed out of the room, his mind feeling the clearest it had been all day.

The rest of the day flew smoothly for Feliciano, his ability to avoid interactions with other students helping his mood to steadily improve. Kiku, recognizing that the Italian was in no mood to talk, simply let him be during lunch, a fact Feliciano greatly appreciated.

Gym was, as always, treated as a study hall. Feliciano spent the majority of the class picking at his nails, wondering how he was going to face his brother the next morning. For once, he was grateful for Lovino's late schedule since it gave him more time to think about what he was going to say.

The final bell rang, granting the students freedom for the weekend. Feliciano made his way to his locker and gathered his thing before heading outside to wait for Antonio.

Only, it wasn't Antonio who met him.

It was Lovino.

"Lovi? Aren't you supposed to be on your way to work?" Feliciano asked in shock.

Lovino was scowling at the ground, turning on his heel to walk away as he said, "I took the day off. C'mon, let's go home."

Feliciano stood in shock before scrambling to catch up with him, "But why? You never take the day off."

Lovino's eyes shifted to his brother for a split second, but he returned his gaze to the ground before saying, "Hmph, maybe I just didn't feel like going in."

Feliciano bit his lip, trying to figure out what Lovino was really trying to say. Something that he had figured out about his brother over the years was that Lovino was exceptionally good at hiding what he really wanted to say. Unfortunately, Feliciano wasn't all that skilled at reading him, and for the life of him he couldn't decipher what his brother meant at that moment.

Lovino glanced to the side before he opened his mouth to say something, snapping it shut in an aborted attempt to speak. After a few more attempts, he finally found his voice, "I know you could hear me and Antonio this morning." Feliciano's head shot up, thinking he had been caught in his eavesdropping, but Lovino cut off the apology before it could escape his lips, "Don't look so shocked, we were both yelling loud enough to wake up the whole damn floor."

Feliciano nodded slowly and started fidgeting.

“Listen, I’m not very good at this, but Antonio said that I needed to work on using my words,” Lovino breathed in deeply before he rushed out, “I’m sorry for being such a stubborn ass lately. It wasn’t fucking cool, and you don’t deserve to suffer because I can’t get my shit together.” He crossed his arms in a huff, looking anywhere but at his brother.

“What?” Feliciano asked in shock, never thinking that his brother would admit guilt for something like that. Lovino had always been stubborn, but Feliciano never thought that he had been the cause of any of his suffering.

“I also talked to Antonio and we both agreed that it would be okay for you to get a part-time job.” Lovino grit out with some difficulty, clearly not very happy about the decision.

Feliciano finally found his voice at that, “Really? Thank you! I promise it won’t get in the way of school, and I’ll work extra hard to-”

“But,” Lovino cut him off, “I get to approve where you work, and I don’t want you working more than three days out of the week. And no, that is not negotiable.” he said with finality.

Feliciano nodded enthusiastically, willing to give into whatever demands Lovino had. He was just so relieved that he was finally able to contribute in a meaningful way.

Finally, I won’t be useless anymore!

Overcome with excitement, Feliciano launched himself at his brother in a bone-crushing hug. *“Grazie,* Lovi! I promise I won’t let you down!”

Lovino nearly toppled over at the sudden weight, but he was able to keep his balance. With a little huff, he patted the younger awkwardly on the back, “Yeah, yeah. Now get off of me.”

Feliciano stepped away with a wide smile, “Lovi, since you’re not going to work tonight, can we all sit down together and watch a movie?”

Lovino looked at his brother's hopeful amber eyes, sighing as he gave in, “Fine, but we are not watching any of those garbage musicals you’re so obsessed with.”

“But Lovi, they’re so much fun to sing along to!” Feliciano laughed.

Lovino just huffed, but the slight smile on his face didn’t escape Felciano’s notice. Whatever the reason he took the day off work, Feliciano was going to make the most of it.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I really should be sleeping instead of writing. Oh, well!

Hope you enjoyed this! Still heavy on the angst, but it's necessary, dammit!

One more thing, I updated the tags and upped the rating just to be safe. Nothing in here will get too graphic (at least I don't plan on it, but thing kind of has a mind of its own so who knows). Just thought I should mention that.

As always, feedback is welcome.

Till next time.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano woke up slowly, his eyes still heavy with sleep on a lazy Saturday morning. He yawned, stretching his arms languidly above his head before rolling over to fumble around blindly for his phone. He found it on his nightstand, pulling it closer to groggily squint at the screen. He saw that he had a notification from an unknown number before he let his eyes drift to the time — 10:23 a.m.

The teen almost rolled right back over when he saw how ungodly early it was.

Who would be texting me this early in the morning?

Feliciano unlocked his phone and read the message:

From: UNKNOWN

> Good morning, this is Ludwig from class. What time are you free to go to the library today?

Feliciano snorted in amusement at the way he identified himself as 'Ludwig from class.' *As if I know another Ludwig, honestly.*

He pursed his lips in thought, trying to remember if he had anything planned for the day. He recalled how his brother was still wide awake while he and Antonio were slumped over each other on the couch last night. Feliciano barely remembered being half dragged into his room by an irritable Lovino, which meant that he would sleep for at least another few hours. Antonio also liked to sleep in on his days off, and even if he was awake he would be loath to miss out on an opportunity to curl up with Lovino.

To: Ludwig

> Hi! Is there anyway that we can meet before 2?

Even though Feliciano hated to get out of bed earlier than what was strictly necessary, he wanted to make sure that he was back in time to see his brother off to work. Besides that, he knew that Antonio tended to get lonely if he was left in the apartment by himself.

Feliciano crawled out of bed and started getting ready for the day. Just as he began pulling a comb haphazardly through his hair, he saw his phone light up with a notification. He snatched it, squinting at the screen once more:

From: Ludwig

> How about 11:30?

Feliciano looked at the time and realized that that would give him forty-five minutes.

The library is a ten minute walk, assuming that I don't get lost. That gives me roughly a half hour to get ready and out the door.

To: Ludwig

Perfect see you then :)

Feliciano threw his phone lightly onto the bed and continued to make himself look at least somewhat presentable. Once he had managed to clean himself up a little (though that damn curl still refused to be tamed), he shuffled into the kitchen looking for something to eat — eventually deciding to just throw a piece of bread in the toaster.

As the toaster cooked his meager breakfast, Feliciano padded back into his room to grab his phone. The time now read five past eleven, meaning he would need to depart in ten minutes since he wanted to give himself some extra time to get to the library (oh, how he loathed his tendency to get lost).

Feliciano slipped his phone into his back pocket and moved to stand outside Lovino and Antonio's room, finding the door cracked open just the slightest bit. He slowly pushed it the rest of the way open, knocking lightly as he announced himself.

"Toni, you awake?" he whispered.

"Yeah, what's up?" Antonio asked, peeking up to look over the blanket. From where Feliciano was standing it looked like Antonio had his brother pulled against his chest while Lovino continued to sleep on like the dead.

"I just wanted to let you know that I'm going to the library to work on some homework with a classmate." Feliciano said quietly, mindful of his sleeping brother.

"The one around the corner from the deli?" Antonio asked.

Feliciano nodded, "Yup!"

Antonio shrugged his shoulders, although he did so carefully as to not jostle his slumbering boyfriend in his arms, "Sounds good to me. Text me when you get there, though."

"I will, bye Toni!" Feliciano waved wildly even as he closed the door behind him.

He made it back to the kitchen and shoved on his shoes as he started humming a cheerful little tune to himself. He grabbed his bookbag and snatched his breakfast from the toaster, bouncing excitedly out the door and down onto the bustling streets below.

Feliciano managed to only get lost once and arrived at the library just a few minutes late — something he was rather proud of. The outside of the brick building looked unremarkable enough, so it was with little contemplation that he pulled the glass door open…

… only to gape at just how expansive the place seemed to be.

For starters, it was two stories tall. The first floor had a little coffee shop nestled in the corner before the small dining area gave way to a seemingly endless labyrinth of books and magazines. There was a row of computers against the back wall and clusters of tables spaced around an open area. Feliciano saw stairs that no doubt led to another floor full of books and workspaces.

This is massive! How am I supposed to find Ludwig in here?

Feliciano had lived in a city before, for four years in fact with Grandpa Roma. But the library there was only a fraction of the size. Before he and Lovino moved in with Roma, they had lived in a small town in Italy where the only library he had access to was his school's.

He looked around trying to figure out the best way to start searching for Ludwig before he remembered that he didn't have to search at all.

Oh right, I can just text him. Feliciano thought as he dug out his phone.

To: Ludwig

I'm here where are you?

While he was on his phone, he shot off a text to Antonio to let him know that he had made it safely.

Feliciano looked up when he was finished and felt a twinge of anxiety worm its way through his stomach. People seemed to pay no heed to the notion that libraries were supposed to be *quiet.* The teen was hyper-aware of the little noises going on in the room, and it was with a frustrated pang that he realized that his breathing had gone shallow.

Oh Dio, I can't freak out now!

But he couldn't help but notice the sound the keys made when people typed, how the printer moaned as it spit out paper after paper, the clatter of equipment as the baristas became overwhelmed with demanding customers. Even the clock on the wall was unbearably loud with its ceaseless *tick… tick… tick…*

Sounds began to bounce off one another, crashing and careening all around him. He felt rather than heard echoes from the clatter shoot off the walls and pierce through him. His hands were getting clammy as the noise just got louder, louder, *louder.*

He was being swallowed up by the overbearingly noisy room. It was unfamiliar, uninviting, and horribly oppressive. Feliciano simply stood frozen, unable to move in his silent panic.

Is this even a library?

There were books, sure, but no other characteristics that typically defined a library, *like being quiet*, were present.

Feliciano almost screamed when he felt a finger poke at his shoulder. He whipped around, still incredibly on edge about the not-library he was trapped in. He caught sight of blond hair and blue eyes, his shoulders instantly slumping heavily down in relief. Ludwig had found him.

“Are you alright?” the blond asked, watching as Feliciano tried to come back from whatever frenzy his mind had been stuck in.

It’s just a little chatter — Dio, there’s no need to panic. Pull yourself together!

With a deep breath he put on a smile and said, “I’m great! I hope you haven’t been waiting too long for me. I turned at the wrong deli, there’s just so many of them!”

Ludwig nodded slowly, unsure how to handle Feliciano’s abrupt change in demeanor, “Well, I found a spot upstairs to start working.”

Good, anywhere but down here.

“Lead the way, Commander!” Feliciano said with a mock salute.

Ludwig huffed, but if Feliciano wasn’t mistaken then there was also a ghost of a smile on his lips. They weaved their way through the busy floor, and as they walked towards the stairs Feliciano felt compelled to ask, “So is it always this noisy down here? ‘Cause the librarians at my old home would always get mad at me if I was being too loud.”

“The first floor serves as more of a community center than anything. Upstairs is for people who want to study or read.” Ludwig explained shortly.

“Ah, so there’ll be less noise,” Feliciano breathed, the relief in his voice almost palpable.

“Yeah…” Ludwig trailed off as he led them up the stairs, shooting a curious look at Italian’s sudden shift in demeanor.

The noise faded with each step they went up, and Feliciano felt some of the previous anxiety slowly draining out of him. Ludwig led them to a table nestled comfortably in the corner and blessedly away from any other people.

“Okay!” Feliciano clapped his hands excitedly together, having mostly recovered from his momentary panic, “where should we start?”

“The assignment was to pick a cliché and write a story around it. I suggest that we start by picking a common cliché and go from there.” Ludwig proposed.

“Sounds good! What cliché should we do?” Feliciano asked, not giving Ludwig a chance to answer before launching into his excited rambling, “How about, ‘and they lived happily ever after’? Oh! Or maybe our character could be like, ‘the chosen one’?”

“Whatever you want, I don’t particularly care. Let's just choose one and get working.” Ludwig said indifferently.

“But it’s gotta be a good one or else our story won’t be any good!” Feliciano whined, eyes scrunching tightly in thought.

Ludwig shrugged, content to let the Italian agonize over it as he sat in silence.

“I got it!” Feliciano exclaimed loudly, making Ludwig jump and nearby students look over in annoyance. “Love at first sight!”

Ludwig nodded with a shrug, “*Ja*, that sounds good to me.”

The next hour or so was spent writing a rough outline, the task as tedious as it sounded. The project had to be finished by the coming Friday, so they set a tentative schedule to meet again that week.

“Alrighty, I think that’s good for now.” Feliciano said as he sat back in his seat.

“I agree.” Ludwig put down his pencil and began packing up his things. “Let’s meet here again on Tuesday after school.”

Feliciano nodded his head enthusiastically, thoroughly enjoying his time around the stoic blond. He certainly didn’t talk much, but he was plenty expressive. His eyes crinkled around the edges when he found something amusing, and his lips would quirk down slightly when he was deep in thought. Feliciano also thought that it was quite endearing the way his hands would fidget as he fought for his words.

They exited the building and began walking down the sidewalk. “Which way are you going? We could walk back together!” Feliciano exclaimed excitedly.

“Uh, I’m down this way, but I can walk with you a little ways if you want?” Ludwig suggested, and Feliciano thought he could hear a touch of nervousness in his voice. He looked at Ludwig’s hands for confirmation and found that they were indeed fidgeting.

Feliciano thought about it, “Are you sure? I don’t want to make you go too far out of your way.”

Ludwig shook his head, “It’s no trouble. Besides I, um…” he shook his head to himself, fighting for the words he was obviously uncomfortable speaking aloud, “I want to make sure you get back alright.”

Feliciano felt a slight tug in his chest with how sweet the gesture was, fixing the blond with a soft smile, “Okay then, as long as you’re alright with it.”

Ludwig didn’t offer any more words, nodding as he started walking down the sidewalk. They were both silent for the majority of the way, Ludwig not knowing what to say and Feliciano too busy humming softly to himself.

They made it to their destination, the silent walk having been enjoyable, “I’m just up here. Thanks so much for walking me back!”

Ludwig nodded stiffly, “It was no trouble.”

With another appreciative smile, Feliciano began walking away with a loose wave, “I’ll see you on Monday, bye Ludwig!”

“Yeah, see you then.” Ludwig said, hand raised in an awkward half-wave. Feliciano just smiled brighter as he stepped inside the apartment building.

Feliciano resumed in his humming as he climbed his way up the stairwell — the elevator was all kinds of sketchy — before skipping down the long hallway. He opened the door to see Lovino in the kitchen cooking lunch (or breakfast since he probably just woke up). Antonio was on the couch watching some soap opera that he was hooked on.

“Hi Feli! How did it go?” Antonio said as he craned his neck to look at the younger.

Feliciano, for once, didn’t say a word. He just shared the widest smile that he could with his little family, blinding them with just how bright it was.

Chapter End Notes

Boom, another chapter.

This one took a bit longer to get out because school's kicking my butt. Go to college, they said, it would be fun, they said. Liars, all of them.

Anyways, hope you enjoyed the chapter. Let me know what you think!

Thanks for reading, til next time.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano spent Sunday wrapped in the comfort of their small apartment with his brother and Antonio. The atmosphere remained light (despite Lovino's characteristic grumbling) and it was a nice change of pace from the hectic nature of the new school year.

It had hardly been two months since Roma had died, and nobody had yet recovered from that devastating loss. It was on days like Sundays, when none of them had any obligations to fulfill, that Feliciano felt the most at peace — like maybe they could all one day heal.

But peace was such a fickle thing, and all too soon, that peaceful Sunday afternoon bled into Monday morning.

The morning was its usual sequence of, 'get your ass out of bed,' and 'coffee first,' (Lovino was as predictable as they come), but Feliciano found comfort in the foreseeable nature of those hazy mornings.

School was also characterised by a sense of secure predictableness when Alfred received a note from the scary Russian once again in first period. But this time he didn't throw a fit, instead choosing to neatly fold up the note and place it in his pocket.

Matthew was trying to hold his laughter from the other side of the room when he saw.

Feliciano just wished Alfred would tell him what was going on.

The Italian bounced his way into Mr. Kirkland's class, for once excited to attend one of his droning lectures. After all, there was a certain blond in there that he was particularly happy to see, "Hi Ludwig! How was the rest of your weekend?"

Ludwig jumped at being addressed so suddenly (and loudly), turning to peer up at the excitable teen before him, "It was good, thank you. What about you?"

While the response was decidedly less enthusiastic than Feliciano's, he didn't seem particularly inconvenienced by the conversation. Feliciano flopped clumsily in his chair, turning to fix Ludwig with a bright smile, "It was great! My brother and Antonio didn't have to work, so we spent the entire day hanging out together. That doesn't happen very often, so we made sure to make the most out of it!" he rambled, not realizing that he wasn't making a whole lot of sense to someone who didn't know his family's situation.

In a rare show of curiosity Ludwig asked, "You live with your brother?"

"*Sì*. Lovino and I live in an apartment together with Antonio. Antonio is Lovino's…" Feliciano trailed off, not sure if he should reveal the nature of their relationship just yet. He

trusted Ludwig, but that lingering fear that he would react negatively forced him to finish weakly, "...friend. Antonio is our friend. "

Ludwig nodded, "Sorry if I was prying, I just live with my brother as well."

"Really? That's so cool that we have something in common! What's his name? What's he like?" Feliciano asked eagerly.

"His name is Gilbert, and he's a massive *dummkopf*." Ludwig said, looking exasperated at the mere thought of his older brother.

Feliciano laughed into his hand, "I don't know what that means, but you said it like an insult so I'm guessing it's not very nice."

Ludwig snorted, "It's not nice, no, but he deserves it. My brother can be quite… unmanageable."

"You should meet Lovino." Feliciano chuckled, "Talk about unmanageable! I mean he's so stubborn that he used to go on hunger strikes when we were younger to avoid eating anything that wasn't pasta."

Ludwig couldn't stop the snort of amusement, "Gilbert used to do something similar. Though instead of outright refusing to eat, he would hide all the pots and pans." he smirked with a fond roll of his eyes, "He wouldn't tell anybody where they were until we agreed to make what he wanted to eat."

"Sounds like he's clever. Lovino's just stubborn and hates it when he doesn't get his way." Feliciano said, a hint of exasperation entering his voice.

"Clever is not a word I would use to describe Gilbert. *Devious*, more like." Ludwig explained though not unkindly.

Feliciano laughed loudly, intent on sharing one of Lovino's more *devious* stunts when Mr. Kirkland stomped in. The teen pouted, disappointed that his conversation was cut short, but he fell silent with the rest of the class.

The lecture was about as dull as every other day, and it was to the relief of the entire class when their teacher finally wrapped things up, "Well that's all I have for you today. Why don't you get with your partner and continue working on your story."

With a heavy sigh of relief, Feliciano swivelled in his chair. He waited expectantly for Ludwig to turn as well before asking, "Are we still planning to meet tomorrow after school?"

"*Ja*, that's fine. Our outline is done, we just need to start writing." Ludwig said thoughtfully

Feliciano nodded excitedly, already looking forward to working together with the stoic blond. Even though the thought of that massive library filled him with anxiety, he knew that he would be fine so long as they stayed upstairs where it was quiet.

And Ludwig being there helps, too.

He shook that stray thought from his head and focused on what Ludwig was saying, "...and I doubt that this will be the only part of the assignment."

"What do you mean?" Feliciano asked curiously, as if he hadn't completely missed the first half of the statement.

"Knowing this class and who's teaching it," here Ludwig looked pointedly at their stuffy teacher, "then it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility that we will be assigned a follow-up paper after we complete our story."

Feliciano pouted, "Yeah, I guess you're right. But that's not very fair."

Ludwig shrugged, "This is a literature class, it would make sense that we would have to analyze our own story."

"Yeah, but still." Feliciano huffed.

The bell rang shortly thereafter, and Feliciano was quick to gather his belongings. He waited for Ludwig to stand up as well, the two walking out of the classroom side by side. The Italian was in particularly high spirits, babbling about anything and everything while Ludwig dutifully nodded along.

All too soon, they had to split ways, and Feliciano turned to Ludwig with a nervous smile, "I'll see you in gym class today, won't I?"

"Yeah, I'll see you then." was the mumbled response.

Feliciano beamed, waving as he said, "I can't wait, see you later!"

Ludwig was left standing in the hallway watching him walk away, the words *I look forward to it as well* frozen on his tongue.

Lunch went by much the same as the previous week, Feliciano sitting against the lockers as he excitedly recounted his weekend to the quiet boy at his side. Kiku nodded along as he ate, adding in a thoughtful comment or hum of agreement when the conversation lulled — not that that happened often when Feliciano was the one speaking.

After lunch, he sat bored through his biology class, but he was revitalized when the bell signified his freedom. Next was art class, the teen's absolute favorite subject.

Feliciano had always excelled in art, possessing a natural talent when it came to drawing or painting. As a kid, he would draw for hours on end when he could get away with it. Roma was his number one supporter, always giving advice or encouragement to his work. Feliciano still felt Roma's presence when he drew, like he was silently guiding his hand. Even now, when he felt overcome with grief at his grandfather's death, Feliciano would draw. It made him feel closer to his late grandfather.

The classroom was abuzz with nervous excitement, anticipating a new project that day. Feliciano spotted Kiku in the back, waltzing over to plop down in the seat next to him as they

patiently waited for their teacher to arrive.

“Good afternoon, my wonderful students.” came a distinct French accent, “Today I would like you to draw something that you find beautiful.” their teacher glided his way to the front of the class with a flourish, obviously indulging himself in the attention his students gave him.

Francis Bonnefoy was, for lack of a better word, *extra*. He flitted from student to student, offering advice and critiques where he could. The way he would strut around the classroom made him look like he was auditioning for a spot on the runway — his turns were graceful, and every gesture he made was executed with a flourish. His silky blond hair perfectly framed his face, each movement seeming delicate yet decisive. Feliciano had little doubt that the man could be a model if he so desired.

But despite his flamboyant personality, he was a gifted artist and wonderful teacher. The class had fallen in love with his eccentricities already, and his passion for the arts encouraged everyone to try their hardest.

Feliciano brought his focus back down to the desk. He sat for a moment, thinking about what he should draw, before looking to Kiku in search of inspiration, “Hey Kiku, whatcha drawing?”

Kiku’s eyes left his own paper with a small smile, “I saw some flowers growing up from the sidewalk this morning. Their resilience was inspiring, and I find that beautiful.” was his surprising response.

“Wow, that’s so cool! I don’t think I saw anything that pretty this morning…” Feliciano said, trying to remember if he saw anything that inspired him on his walk to school.

“The term ‘beautiful’ does not have to mean something that is pretty. There is beauty to be found even in the imperfect.” Kiku remarked.

“Huh.” Feliciano said, unsure what to do with the insightful response. He sat listening to Kiku’s pencil gently scratching the paper, thinking about what he had said.

What’s beautiful to me?

A memory flashed before his eyes, and it was in a split second that he knew the answer to his own question. Without any further contemplation, Feliciano bent his head over the pad of paper and began sketching a rough outline.

By the time there was only ten minutes left of class, Feliciano had almost finished his drawing. Francis (*“Mr. Bonnefoy makes me feel like an old man. Call me Francis, oui?”*) was doing his rounds of the class, offering critiques as he walked by.

He passed by Feliciano’s table and examined Kiku’s work first, “My, my, what lovely flowers. Try adding some heavier shadows, it will add a nice contrast to the delicate petals.” Kiku nodded in agreement and began adding heavier shading where Francis had suggested.

Francis then took a look at Feliciano's piece, his eyes flashing in surprise. But the momentary shock was soon forgotten as the man asked softly, "Who's this?"

Feliciano looked down at his picture and felt his features soften. It was a snapshot of Friday night, when Lovino had taken the day off work. It showed the moment when he and Antonio first started to nod off, slumped heavily over each other with a blanket pooled around them. Lovino sat off to the side watching over them, a look of fondness tinged with a healthy dose of annoyance clearly written on his face. Feliciano couldn't exactly see what they had looked like piled on that couch, but he felt like he captured the moment fairly well.

"That's me sleeping with Antonio. My brother, Lovino, is the grumpy one. They're my *famiglia*." Feliciano breathed as he reminisced on the perfect night.

Francis nodded with a light smile, "Well I think that you captured the moment perfectly. You have a beautiful family."

"Yeah," Feliciano nodded, warmth blooming in his chest, "I really do."

Gym that day was, for once, not treated as a study hall. Once the class was changed into their uniforms, they were herded out onto the track outside. Feliciano looked around and spotted Ludwig hanging in the back.

"Hey, Ludwig!" Feliciano called, trying to get his attention. Ludwig turned, watching in amusement as the Italian ~~skillfully~~ *clumsily* maneuvered his way through the crowd towards him, "Whew, made it. Do you know what we're doing out here?"

"They want to get our mile time. They are going to record it as a benchmark and monitor our progress." Ludwig informed him with a nod of apparent approval.

"Ugh, I didn't want to exercise today." Feliciano whined.

Ludwig quirked an eyebrow up at that, "What did you expect? This is a gym class after all."

Feliciano grumbled quietly to himself, clearly unhappy about the recent turn of events, but he dutifully marched along when the class was corralled onto the track. They were instructed to start running when the whistle was blown, and Feliciano took his place next to Ludwig and waited for the whistle to signal the beginning of his suffering.

All too soon the whistle shrieked, prompting the class to begin. Ludwig, natural athlete that he was, took off at a brisk pace. Feliciano tried to keep up, but was soon falling behind.

Feliciano knew that he was a natural runner, his lithe frame being ideal for long distances. However, he hardly ever felt the motivation to put that body to use. He knew that he *could* run, but *would* he run was the real question.

Right now, Feliciano didn't feel like doing anything that required effort, and running took *a lot* of effort. He resigned himself to settle for a light jog, and tried to distract himself from the

current torture he was being subjected to. He tried watching the birds as they flew, or the stray cat that trotted by, but he was quickly losing interest.

Ugh, I don't feel like I'm going anywhere on this track. I'm literally going in circles.

He looked around again, trying to find anything to break the monotony of the mindless running. His eyes drifted to the front of the pack and found Ludwig running far ahead.

Wow, those muscles aren't just for show.

Feliciano absently thought, unable to help it when his eyes focused on the way the German moved. Where Feliciano was lithe, Ludwig was built. His body moved with confidence, each step was placed with precision, muscles tensing before propelling him forward. The activity was causing Ludwig's hair to break free of its rigid style, strands falling delicately around his face.

Cute.

Feliciano, now thoroughly distracted, was able to finish his run in under twelve minutes. He stood to the side of the track, bent over by the waist as he desperately tried to catch his breath. He saw Ludwig a little ways off, standing up with great effort to make his way over to the blond.

"That wasn't very fun. You don't even look tired, that mile almost killed me!" Feliciano called loudly as he gripped a hand over his heart.

"Don't be dramatic, it wasn't that bad." Ludwig said, wiping at his forehead.

Feliciano pouted, thinking it was wholly unfair the way the blond seemed so unaffected by the run. He looked up at Ludwig and noticed how his hair was the most disheveled he had ever seen. The pout he was sporting melted away, feeling the sudden urge to do something about it. He moved closer to him, standing on his toes to push Ludwig's hair back in place.

Ludwig froze, completely transfixed as he watched Feliciano run a hand through his hair. The blond seemed to be at a loss, his face heating up to what must have been thousands of degrees.

"There, that's better." Feliciano chirped, moving back to admire his work. His face lit up in amusement when he saw how red Ludwig was, "I think you got sunburnt, your face is all red!"

Ludwig refused to meet his eyes, nodding quickly as he said, *"Ja,* that must be it."

The students shuffled back inside the school to change, Feliciano finding Ludwig again right as the final bell began to ring. He looked like he had tidied up some, his face no longer that aggressive red hue.

They walked towards the front door together, Feliciano mustering the courage to speak before he finally mumbled out, "So I'll see you tomorrow then, right?"

Ludwig looked at him blankly, like the answer was obvious, “Of course, why wouldn’t you?”

“Ha, right. Dumb question.” Feliciano rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly.

The two fell into an awkward silence until they reached the entrance of the school. Feliciano spotted Antonio waiting for him, forgetting his earlier awkwardness as he turned to Ludwig, “See ya tomorrow, I’m glad you’re not sunburned anymore!”

And just like magic, the sunburn reappeared as Ludwig’s hands started fidgeting, “Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

Feliciano smiled once more before turning to join Antonio. Ludwig was left watching them walk away, that dusting of red not quite fading until far later that night.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter, for some reason, gave me a bit of grief trying to write. But whatever, it's done and I rather like how it turned out. Finally some interaction between our boys, you love to see it.

Anyway, thanks for checking it out. Let me know how it is! Any suggestions to where you would like to see the story go?

As always, til next time!

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next morning started out as a lazy affair; Lovino was sitting with his cup of coffee cradled to his chest, Feliciano chattered excitedly about his plans after school, and Antonio stood over the stove making their breakfast. The sun gilded the interior a shimmering gold, the air comfortingly heavy and warm. It was perfect, the day starting off so wonderfully that Feliciano thought that nothing could destroy the gentle peace that surrounded them.

That is, until something did.

A shrill ring cut through the comfortable atmosphere, effectively shattering the perfect moment they had been caught up in. Lovino grumbled as he dug out his phone, eyes squinting in confusion as he read the screen. With a gentle shrug, he brought the phone to his ear, *"Pronto."*

Whatever Lovino heard on the other end of the line drained all the color from his face. His breath caught in his throat, the reaction enough for Felciano and Antonio to turn questioning gazes his direction. After a few frozen seconds, Lovino recovered from his momentary state of shock. He snarled viciously, face twisted in rage, "How the *fuck* did you get this number?"

It may be true that Lovino was never one to hide his displeasure — hell, complaining was practically his first language — but Feliciano had never, not once, heard his brother growl with such vitriolic loathing before.

Apparently Antonio was of a similar mindset, both he and Feliciano looking on in shock as they became fully invested in the scene that was transpiring in their little kitchen.

It was frustrating not knowing what was going on on the other end of the conversation, Lovino's reactions the only thing Feliciano had to go off of. But what was most disconcerting was the way Lovino's eyes glazed over in fear before he was able to stifle the look. He caught himself, masking the fear with a mask of cold fury, reigning in his obvious rage before he delivered his measured response, "If you ever call me again, I swear— you. will. regret. it." he spit each word through clenched teeth before violently hanging up on the mystery caller.

The moments immediately following the sudden outburst was characterised by a taut silence that held every member of their little family captive. Lovino's laboured breathing was the only thing that disturbed the viscous air around them, the tension so tight that it was a miracle nobody snapped under the pressure.

Feliciano shook his head to dispel the heavy cloud of foreboding around him, finally able to reclaim his voice, "Lovi, who was that?"

Lovino snapped his eyes up to meet his brother's, and Feliciano found himself pinned to the spot by their intensity. He thought he could see a glimpse of fear flash through those wild

eyes once again, but Lovino quickly squashed it before saying shakily, “Nobody, wrong number.”

This time it was Antonio’s turn to voice his doubt, “That didn’t sound like it was nobody. You wouldn’t threaten somebody like that over a wrong number.”

Lovino shook his head, sitting tensely on the edge of his chair with searching eyes, “No, it was a wrong number. Nothing else.”

It sounded like he was trying to convince himself, a manic tone edging his voice. Those eyes were still blown wide open, his breathing coming out in shallow puffs.

Antonio crossed his arms, obviously not believing him, “Okay, now the truth.”

“I already told you.” he said hollowly, “It was nobody.”

“But Lovi-”

“*It was a wrong number, dammit!*” Lovino screeched, launching out of his seat, breath ragged. His shoulders had shot straight up towards his ears, his posture screaming defensiveness.

Anything Antonio planned on saying next subsequently died on his tongue. He brought a careful hand up to rest on his boyfriend’s heaving shoulder, face crumpling in distress with the way Lovino flinched away, “Okay Lovi, it was a wrong number. Please, just calm down.”

Lovino’s panicked eyes snapped up to meet Antonio’s calming green ones, and it was with a shuddering breath that he began the internal battle to come down from his state of slight hysteria. He brought a hand up to scrub at his eyes, counting softly out loud until he managed to calm down enough to sit back in his seat.

Letting his shoulders fall, Lovino looked across the table to his younger brother. The sight he was met with made him feel weak with regret.

Feliciano had tears gathered in the corners of his eyes, his expression devastatingly lost. His breathing had gone shallow, the way his shoulders would sporadically hitch up betrayed the younger’s growing state of distress.

“Shit, Feli, I didn’t mean to yell.” Lovino breathed, standing back up as he placed his hands in front of him in what was meant to be a placating gesture.

But the sudden manner in which he stood caused the chair to scrape loudly against the floor, causing Feliciano to flinch violently away.

Lovino looked physically ill at the reaction, “Fuck, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, I just…” he took a step back as he struggled for the right words, pushing a shaky hand through his hair.

Feliciano scrubbed an arm across his eyes, trying to erase all evidence of the faint edge of panic that lingered just beneath the surface. He didn’t want to make his brother feel bad, so

he pushed down his own distress in favor of shrugging off the whole ordeal, “No, it’s fine. I’m sorry, I was just overreacting like usual.”

“No it’s my fault. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to scare you.” Lovino very nearly whispered, not daring to step forward lest he spook his brother again.

Antonio took that as his cue to defuse the situation, “How about we all just take a seat and a deep breath.”

Without another word, Lovino sat. He trained his eyes guiltily on the table, and even if he wasn’t one to fidget, his hands twisted viciously in his lap

Feliciano sat nervously in his own chair, finally able to get his breathing under control. Unlike his brother, he tended to fidget almost constantly, so it was no surprise when he started picking harshly at his nails.

Breakfast carried on awkwardly, nobody knowing quite what to say. The sun was climbing higher into the sky, and it was with a sigh that Feliciano stood to gather his things for school, “I’ve got to go, I’ll see you later.”

“Hold on, you’re not going anywhere on your own.” Lovino said firmly, a nervous edge to his voice.

But Feliciano didn’t quite hear the apprehension that colored his brother’s tone, “I’ll be fine Lovi, it’s not that far.”

“I’m coming with you.” Lovino said with finality, completely ignoring the younger’s protests.

Even though it was clear he had lost the short argument, Feliciano felt inclined to say, “You let me go by myself before, why not now?”

Lovino simply shoved his own shoes on, not even looking up as he said, “Because I said so. I don’t want you wandering around when anyone could just grab you off the street.”

“Lovi, that’s ridiculous. Is this about the phone call?” Feliciano pushed.

Lovino stopped moving at the mention of that, looking Feliciano dead in the eyes with a deadened tone, “It was a wrong number. I just want you to be safe.”

Feliciano really had no response to that, shooting a helpless look to Antonio who just returned an equally dumbfounded expression. With a small sigh, Felicano resigned himself to his fate, waving to Antonio before following his brother out the door.

To say that the walk to school was awkward could be regarded as an almost criminal understatement. Beyond just the aftermath of the disastorous morning, Lovino was acting strangely. For starters, he refused to speak, instead choosing to shoot restless glances over his shoulder every few seconds. His hands fidgeted loosely, those breaths still coming out in an odd rhythm that betrayed his anxiety.

Anxiety about *what*, Feliciano had no clue. Distantly he wished his brother would just talk to him, but he was aware of Lovino's obstinance. Really, it was getting to be too much for Feliciano, who could feel his own anxiety spike with the strange behavior. The whole walk was characterised by those pointed glances, and by the time they got to school, Feliciano was as on-edge as Lovino was — and he had no idea why!

“Lovino, please stop doing that.” Feliciano begged, hoping that using his brother’s full name would snap him out the nervous spell he was caught in.

Alas, it was not to be so, “Doing what?” he asked, even as he looked over his shoulder once more.

“Looking over your shoulder like somebody’s about to jump us from behind. You’re making me nervous!” Feliciano almost shouted, casting his own wary glance behind him.

“M’not doing that.” Lovino mumbled distractedly.

Feliciano let out a long-suffering sigh, “Fine, I gotta go Lovi. Have a good night at work.”

“Oi, come here.” Lovino ordered sharply, eyes finally trained solely on his brother and not the imaginary stalker that was apparently after them.

Feliciano approached his brother curiously, having absolutely no idea what was going through his head. He inched closer, nearly yelping when a hand shot out to grab him, “Wha-?”

“*Ti voglio bene, fratellino.*” Lovino whispered, crushing the younger to his chest in a tight hug.

Okay, now I’m worried.

“I love you too but Lovi, are you sure you’re alright?” Feliciano asked, worry clearly written on his face.

“*Sì,* I’m fine.” Lovino released him just as quickly as he had grabbed him. His cheeks were tinted with red, but for once he didn’t seem embarrassed showing affection, “Have a good day at school, text me if you need anything.”

The lack of his brother’s characteristic cursing and general complaining alarmed Feliciano greatly. Lovino looked dazed, and Feliciano briefly hoped that Antonio would be able to unearth whatever was eating at him — he recognized what a stubborn ass his brother could be, especially when he was hiding something. It would be in his best interest to let this go and revisit the topic at another time.

With that in mind, Feliciano turned towards his school, “Alright Lovi, I’ll see you later.”

He departed with a short wave, feeling Lovino’s eyes following him the entire way.

Chapter End Notes

Short chapter, I know. This seemed like a good ending point, and I have finals so I wanted to at least get this going. I am hoping to have the next one up before the end of the week, but just in case I got this up today.

Anyway, the drama commences! Wonder what's got Lovino all on-edge?

As always, thanks for reading! Let me know what you think.

Til next time!

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano spent the majority of the day picking nervously at his nails, paranoid now that Lovino seemed to think that something was wrong. He was tense, and it was impossible to stay focused in class. He hardly even spoke to Ludwig, only nodding listlessly when asked if they still wanted to go to the library after school.

Right, I should probably text Antonio to tell him he shouldn't wait to pick me up.

At the thought, Feliciano dug his phone out of his pocket as he walked slowly to lunch.

To: Antonio

Hey, I'm going to the library after school so you don't need to pick me up

He hit the 'send' button, only looking up when he heard the boisterous clamor of the cafeteria. His feet had taken him there on their own despite the fact that he was still too anxious to even set foot in the noisy environment. In fact, he felt compelled to just walk right by it and go find Kiku when he noticed something, or rather someone, sitting alone in the corner.

Ludwig eats all by himself? That must be so lonely…

Feliciano thought that it would be awful to brave that rowdy room all alone. Suddenly, an idea popped in his head. He turned around and quickly shot back through the hallways until he found his quiet friend sitting against a locker.

Feliciano approached the shy teen and held a hand out, "Let's go eat in the cafeteria today, I want to introduce you to someone."

Kiku stared up at Feliciano, trepidation written clearly across his face, "I don't know if that's a good idea. I am not exactly a people person."

"Don't worry, the person I want you to meet isn't either." Feliciano reassured, eyes sparkling in amusement.

Kiku stared at Feliciano's still outstretched hand for a moment more before he reached out to grab it, "Okay, I trust you."

Feliciano smiled warmly, touched by Kiku's words. In truth, Feliciano had no clue if this was a good idea. His anxiety was already sky high, and he knew that the cafeteria would do nothing but exacerbate it.

But Ludwig is alone, and he deserves to sit with friends too.

His resolve hardened at the thought, hoisting Kiku up as Feliciano led him by the hand to the cafeteria. Once there, Feliciano was dismayed to note that his senses were once again being assaulted by the cacophonous atmosphere of the dining hall. He paused at the edge of the room, hesitation characterizing his every move.

Kiku, perhaps sensing Feliciano's turmoil, gave his hand a quick squeeze. Feliciano looked down with a start, realizing with slight embarrassment that he never dropped Kiku's hand. He gave a slight squeeze back before releasing the hold, walking nervously over to where Ludwig was sitting.

The moment they got within earshot, Feliciano choked down that lingering sense of anxiety to call out to the blond, "Hey, Ludwig! You mind if we sit with you?"

Ludwig's eyes snapped up in surprise, clearly not expecting anyone to approach him during lunch. Recognition lit up his features when he saw who had called out to him, nodding softly in response to the shouted question.

Feliciano was pleased by the way Ludwig's shoulders relaxed when he approached, and it was without a second thought that he sat heavily next to him.

Kiku sat gingerly down as well, making steady eye contact with Ludwig as he took the seat next to Feliciano.

Feliciano looked excitedly between them, launching into a rushed introduction, "This is my friend Kiku, I usually sit with him in the hallway during lunch. Kiku, this is Ludwig, the guy I was talking about." he chirped happily, noting with amusement that Ludwig had gone red when Feliciano admitted that he talked about him to his friend.

"Very nice to meet you." Kiku said, bowing his head just the smallest bit.

"Likewise," was Ludwig's polite response.

The table fell into an awkward silence for approximately three seconds — and even that was a miracle. Feliciano hated tense pauses, and since he never held his tongue for more than what was strictly necessary, he decided to break the brief moment of peace, "So Kiku, how has your day been?"

"It's been good, thank you. How was yours?" Kiku replied courteously.

"It's been alright, but my brother was acting really weird this morning." Feliciano grumbled, dropping his chin into his hand in thought.

"Weird?" Ludwig asked in a rare show of curiosity.

Feliciano vehemently nodded, "Yeah, he got a phone call this morning that made him really angry. Well, he's always angry, but I mean he was like really mad." As if suddenly recalling his brother's strange behavior from earlier, Feliciano cast a nervous glance behind his shoulder despite not really knowing what he was looking for.

“Do you have any idea who it could have been on the phone?” Ludwig asked, also craning his neck in an attempt to spot whatever ghost Feliciano was looking for.

“I have no idea.” Feliciano huffed in annoyance. “I tried asking, but it made him even angrier. It was so weird, he wouldn’t let me walk to school by myself.” he muttered the last part, feeling just a bit irritated that his own brother didn’t trust him enough to get to school on his own.

“I’m sure he just wanted to make sure that you were safe.” This time it was Kiku who chimed in, offering a sympathetic smile.

Feliciano looked between his two friends and nodded, still not entirely sure how he was supposed to feel about the dramatic turn of events that morning.

I’m still worried about Lovi, he was acting so weird. But maybe he just doesn’t trust me. Does he really think that I can’t get to school on my own?

He glared down at his hands at the thought, but his irritated rumination was broken up by the feeling of his phone vibrating in his pocket. Feliciano dug the device out, noting that he had finally received a reply from his earlier text.

From: Antonio

Are you walking there by yourself?

Feliciano very nearly rolled his eyes at the predictability of it all. Of course Lovino would express his fears to Antonio — those two hardly ever kept secrets from each other. But even if it was unsurprising, he was still annoyed. Now it wasn’t only his brother who would be shadowing his every move, but Antonio too. Glaring down at his phone, Feliciano typed out his response a little more aggressively than what was necessary.

To: Antonio

No. Don’t wait up for me.

With a sigh, Feliciano shoved his phone back into his pocket. It’s not like he blamed his brother or Antonio for wanting to look out for him, but he wasn’t some little kid anymore — he could look after himself just fine, thank you very much.

Ludwig and Kiku exchanged quick glances with each other, neither knowing quite what to say. The atmosphere was at risk of becoming awkward again, so Kiku made the swift decision to begin a new conversation with the blond to his side, “I have not seen you around much, are you new to this school?”

Feliciano’s gaze turned curious as he waited for Ludwig’s response, “*Ja.* I’ve lived in the city for a little while, but I only started school here this year.”

Oh, so that’s why he doesn’t have any friends yet — he’s a new kid like me. Feliciano thought, a few puzzle pieces sliding together neatly in his head. *Maybe that’s why he’s sitting alone at lunch.*

Kiku nodded in understanding, “I have not been here long either. This is also my first year at this school.”

“Wow, what a coincidence! I just moved here a couple of months ago.” Feliciano said excitedly. “It’s like our friendship was meant to be!”

Ludwig laughed lightly at that, and Kiku smirked. It did seem strange that they all happened to stumble upon each other shortly after they all started as new students at the same school. To Feliciano though, it was more than happenstance.

“So it’s settled. From now on we are all going to be best friends. It’s destiny!” Feliciano shouted happily, completely caught up in his own flimsy logic.

Ludwig and Kiku looked at each other and shrugged.

“Well, who are we to deny destiny?” Kiku reasoned, a small smile gracing his lips.

The rest of the day went relatively smoothly, his dour mood from earlier pretty much forgotten. The final bell shrilly rang, and Feliciano found himself wading through the restless crowd of students as they rushed the front door. Unfortunately, he hadn’t realized how dense the crowd was until he had to fight his way through it, but Feliciano noticed a shock of blond hair peeking above the horde of rowdy students.

He was pushed and pulled, his small frame ensuring that he was swiftly lost in the chaos. Feliciano did his best to escape the horde, shooting a hand out to snake through Ludwig’s arm the moment he was close enough to reach.

Ludwig snapped his eyes down when he felt the Italian hook their arms together. Feliciano was struggling to hold onto him, the crowd very nearly sweeping his (admittedly scrawny) body away. Ludwig gripped the smaller teen tighter, pulling him closer to his own body. The two finally made their way out of the shifting crowd and to the front of the gate.

“Thanks for that!” Feliciano said gratefully, relieved to breathe in the outside air. He was still pressed closely to Ludwig’s side, arms looped together.

Ludwig, realizing the position they were in, quickly unlooped his arm and shuffled away to put some distance between the two of them, “*Ja*, it was no problem.”

But Feliciano didn’t notice Ludwig’s bashful demeanor, too busy skipping his way down the sidewalk. He had received reluctant approval from Antonio (which was really Lovino by proxy) about walking to the library with Ludwig.

Content that he had gotten what he wanted in the end, Feliciano decided to push his concerns about his brother’s behavior to the wayside in favor of chattering mindlessly throughout the duration of the journey to the library. He hardly stopped for breath, commenting on anything from the wispy clouds above to the artistry of the graffiti they occasionally passed.

Ludwig, for his part, was quite content to nod along. He didn't say anything, bar the occasional hum of agreement, or worried *'you're going to get hit, don't just walk into the street like that!'*

It was all too soon that they made it to their destination, Feliciano not realizing that he had talked the entire way over, "Oh, we're here. That was fast!"

Ludwig huffed in amusement, but nonetheless held the door open so the two could enter the large building.

The moment they stepped inside, Feliciano braced for another overwhelming attack to his senses. He squeezed his eyes shut, anticipating that oppressive feeling of *too loud, too much,* but was shocked to find that the atmosphere didn't feel so overbearing this time around. He cracked open one of his eyes and looked around, finding that the library was just as loud and cluttered as last time. However, that familiar twist of panic never made itself known — much to his immediate relief and confusion.

This isn't so bad, I wonder what's different. Feliciano thought curiously.

He felt Ludwig's hand land loosely on his shoulder, gently steering them the right way. Feliciano let himself be guided, the touch acting as an anchor.

Oh, so that's it.

Smiling lightly to himself, Feliciano walked his way through the noisy room with a newfound sense of confidence. But it turned out that he did have a bit of anxiety work its way through his body because he felt his shoulders slump in relief once they were upstairs.

Feliciano was quickly growing fond of the tranquil atmosphere of the second floor. The hush that descended upon them felt like a warm blanket, juxtaposing the turbulent mess of activity they had escaped from. Feliciano breathed in deeply, feeling oddly at peace despite how desperate he was to escape the building just days before.

The two teens nestled themselves comfortably at the same table they had occupied the last time, promptly retrieving the necessary materials to begin their assignment.

"Okay, so our lovely heroine has fallen madly in love with 'Mister Tall-Dark-and-Handsome.' What's next?" Feliciano asked, bouncing excitedly in his own chair.

"Well if we want to stay true to our cliché then the love interest also falls in love immediately, but plays hard to get." Ludwig mumbled thoughtfully, jotting down some notes.

"Of course." Feliciano nodded seriously. "But in the end, love prevails! Then they ride off into the sunset and live happily ever after." he proclaimed in a dramatic fashion.

"I suppose that's how it goes." Ludwig sighed. "I hate coming up with something so unrealistic, but I suppose that is the essence of this cliché." he shrugged, grumbling under his breath about how trite it all was.

"What's so unrealistic about true love?" Feliciano asked, cocking his head to the side.

Ludwig snorted, “Where do you want me to start?”

Feliciano crossed his arms across his chest with a pout, “Well I don’t think it’s unrealistic to think that love will win.”

Ludwig looked at him in bewilderment before saying earnestly, “I do wonder what it must feel like to be so optimistic all the time. It must be draining if the way you fall asleep every day in class is any indication.”

Feliciano’s mouth hung open at the remark, unable to believe what he had just heard. Ludwig — stoic, straightforward, serious, *Ludwig* — was teasing him. The delivery of the jab was said in such a monotonous way that Feliciano couldn’t decide if the remark was made in jest or not.

But Ludwig didn’t seem to realize the world-shattering blow that he had just delivered because the next thing Feliciano knew, he was smirking at him.

Feliciano sat there shocked for only a moment more before he burst out laughing, “Don’t be mean, Ludwig. I don’t fall asleep *every* day.”

“*Ja,* just most of them.” Ludwig said playfully.

Still giggling lightly at the remark, Feliciano rolled his eyes. He couldn’t properly defend himself because, well, Ludwig wasn’t wrong.

There was the faintest of smirks still firmly on Ludwig’s face, but he was able to reign in his obvious amusement in lieu of getting back to work, “Alright, let’s get this over with.”

Feliciano smiled teasingly, laying his head down on top of his arms, “I don’t know, I’m just *so* tired.”

Ludwig quirked an eyebrow up at that, “Was one nap not enough for you today?”

“Nope!” Feliciano sang brightly, settling down to get more comfortable, “I could always use a *siesta.* You should try it some time.”

Ludwig looked at him disbelievingly, “Why would I do that?”

“Why?” Feliciano scoffed, “Why *wouldn’t* you? *Siestas* are my favorite thing in the whole world!”

“Really?” Ludwig deadpanned, though the way his lips twitched upwards betrayed his growing amusement.

Felicano nodded, but then he thought of something, “Wait, maybe like my second favorite thing — behind pasta!”

Ludwig snorted, “Glad to see your priorities are in order.”

With a bright laugh, Feliciano finally sat up to begin working. While he would love to continue the easy banter indefinitely, he really couldn't stay out that late. So, the rest of the time they spent fleshing out the rest of their story. Ludwig handled most of the writing, the blond hunched over the paper as he furiously wrote down the conclusion to their story.

Feliciano let him write in peace, his eyes roaming lazily across the large room. He spotted a desk a little ways off, watching curiously as an elderly woman checked out a book. The employees at the desk were either reading or tapping away on their computer, a look of tranquility coloring each of their expressions.

They seem so relaxed.

He hummed in contentment, feeling peace blossom in his own chest as he watched them work. His eyes drifted a bit further across the desk, finding a sign propped up against a stack of books. Feliciano squinted, trying to read the words printed on it — *Help Wanted.*

He thought about what a job at the library would be like. On the one hand, the idea of being cooped up on the first floor sounded like a horrifying nightmare. But on the other hand, the second floor was almost a completely different world. Feliciano had yet to feel his anxiety spike while he was up here, and the gentle sound of pages turning and the musty smell of old books was almost soothing.

Without another thought, he made a decision, "I'll be right back."

At Ludwig's short grunt of acknowledgement, Feliciano made his way to the desk and approached one of the ladies who was reading, "Excuse me, are you hiring?"

The lady, who was actually quite old now that Feliciano was up close, smiled kindly back at him, "Yes, are you interested?"

"*Sì,* but is it just for up here? I mean, I wouldn't want to work downstairs or anything." Feliciano said nervously, unconsciously fidgeting with his hands.

"You wouldn't be downstairs at all, we really just need people to return books to their shelves and sit at the front desk. Here, take an application and bring it back when you've completed it." She said, handing the fidgety teen a small packet of papers.

Feliciano accepted it, thanking the lady as he headed back to where Ludwig was still writing.

I'll have to make sure Lovi approves, though I can't see why he wouldn't. Feliciano thought as he tucked the packet in his bag.

"There, I think it's done." Ludwig announced, finally looking up from the desk.

The completed story was slid across the table, Feliciano accepting it without a word. He scanned over it with a critical eye, although he doubted Ludwig would accept anything less than perfection. Satisfied that the story was a coherent piece of literature worthy of their stuffy teacher, Feliciano looked up with a smug smirk, "I like the ending. I told you, love always prevails."

Ludwig huffed loudly, but didn't take the bait, "*Ja,* whatever you say. It's done, but I doubt it will be the end of this assignment."

"Well even if Mister Kirkland extends the project, at least I can spend more time with you!" Feliciano chirped, completely unaware at how the words seemed to affect the blond.

"You talk so carelessly." Ludwig mumbled.

Feliciano put his hands on his hips, a pout coloring his features. "Well it's true. I like hanging out with you."

Ludwig looked down at his hands which had started to twitch, although he was able to refrain from fidgeting. He looked up and met Feliciano's eyes as he forced out, "I like being with you too. I mean, like as partners." Ludwig's eyes went wide as he tried to backtrack, "I mean, as work partners! On this project and… yeah." he finished weakly.

Feliciano giggled at Ludwig's rare state of inelegance — the blond really was awkward when that stern mask was stripped away. Not that he was complaining, Feliciano found that Ludwig's awkwardness was quite endearing, and he decided that he would like to see this side of the German more often.

They walked out of the library together, the atmosphere that surrounded them light and airy. Feliciano didn't say a word as Ludwig turned to walk him to his apartment. They chattered back and forth, each party contributing equally to the conversation — not that the conversation had any substance behind it. Still, it was nice.

All too soon they had made it to Feliciano's apartment, neither really wanting to say goodbye. The sun was beginning to dip, warm reds and yellows creating a vibrant mosaic over the otherwise dull streets. It was like a dream, but Feliciano knew he had to wake up, whispering a gentle, "I guess I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah, see you then." Ludwig breathed, though he made no move to leave.

Hit by a sudden wave of courage, Feliciano surged forward to envelope Ludwig in a brief hug. The blond stood shocked, not having the opportunity to return the embrace before Feliciano was scrambling back again.

"Sorry, I'll see you tomorrow." Feliciano rushed out, already turning to dash back into the building.

But Ludwig caught his wrist before he could escape, "No, it's alright. I'll see you tomorrow." With those final words, he released his grip and started backing away.

Feliciano fought the wide grin that threatened to break free, but it was clearly a losing battle. He turned to face Ludwig entirely, noting that the blond was shuffling awkwardly away. Feliciano waved excitedly, giggling when Ludwig returned it (decidedly less enthusiastically, but that was to be expected).

They both turned their backs, neither noticing how the other made no effort to contain their impossibly happy smiles as they walked away.

Chapter End Notes

Goodness I really should be asleep and not writing this. I don't regret it, but still.

Anyways, thank you so much for giving this a read. I'm having such a wonderful time writing this, and I hope that you're having just as great a time reading it.

Let me know how I'm doing, or what you would like to see. I am super open to taking suggestions. Or if you just want to say hi, that's cool too!

Til next time!

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino jerked awake, groaning in annoyance as his alarm blared obnoxiously in his ear. He had only returned home mere hours before, exhaustion begging him to roll back over and sleep the day away. He knew he couldn't do that, but it was a nice thought. Instead, he grabbed his pillow and shoved it over his head, doing his best to ignore the piercing shriek of his alarm.

At his side, Antonio shifted to reach over Lovino, finally turning off the offending device, *"Buenos días, amado."* he mumbled drowsily. Antonio layed back down, snaking an arm around the smaller's waist to pull him close.

Lovino groaned once more, although the sound was severely muffled by the pillow he still had pushed over his head.

Antonio shifted again, probably to look down at his grumpy boyfriend before laughing softly in amusement. Without a word, he removed the pillow from Lovino's face, smiling at the way his eyes scrunched up against the light.

"What the hell, bastard?" Lovino complained, reaching out blindly for his pillow.

"It's time to get up, *querido.*" Antonio said gently, moving to press a lingering kiss to his temple.

Lovino would like to deny how much he enjoyed these soft mornings, but he was honestly too exhausted to lie to himself. That didn't stop the slight grumble that broke free, but it was with little complaint that he craned his neck upwards to meet Antonio's lips with his own.

They lazily exchanged kisses, Lovino's eyes drifting closed once more in contentment. He would gladly lay there in bed with his boyfriend all day long, but it just wasn't possible. So, to the great displeasure of both parties, Lovino pulled away with a sigh, moving to untangle himself from the twisted mess of limbs they had become, "C'mon, you're the one that said we should get up."

"I'm reconsidering." Antonio huffed, yanking Lovino back down to plant kisses anywhere he could reach.

Lovino squirmed, pushing weakly against his boyfriend's chest when Antonio's lips reached his neck. However, his half-hearted attempts to get away only seemed to encourage the Spaniard further. His hands started to roam, and it wasn't long until he had pushed his hands under Lovino's shirt and smoothed over the soft skin below.

Despite the warm hands, Lovino shivered at the contact. His resolve to get up was waning with every passing second, their lips still locked as the gentle sunlight poured into their little

room. Lovino finally relaxed with a sigh, giving in entirely to his boyfriend's needy hands, when a phone started wailing, thoroughly obliterating the hazy atmosphere.

Lovino jerked up, head whipping to the side as Antonio groaned loudly in annoyance, flopping back over with a pout.

Squinting his eyes against the sunlight in order to read the screen, Lovino tried to make out who was calling him. When it registered exactly who it was, he turned off the ringer with an angry growl.

"Is it the same person as before?" Antonio asked curiously, noting with some concern how the Italian's mood seemed to plummet.

"Yup." Lovino grit out, massaging his temples in an attempt to calm down. Today was Friday, marking the third day since *he* had started harassing Lovino. He could hardly go an hour without getting a phone call, and every time he saw that accursed number pop up he got just a little bit angrier.

And also just a little bit more anxious.

Damn bastard, who the hell does he think he is?

Antonio sighed as he watched Lovino fume quietly to himself. He pushed the covers back before swinging his legs over the side of the bed to get ready.

Lovino followed his lead, not bothering to get fully dressed — what was the point when he was just going to roll back over the second he was left alone? However, he did take care to at the very least look presentable so that he could walk his brother to school.

Shortly thereafter, they both shuffled out of their room and ambled tiredly into the kitchen. Lovino was quick to curl up on one of the wooden chairs, legs pulled securely under him. Antonio made a beeline to the coffee pot, immediately working to brew the bitter drink.

They didn't exchange any words — none were needed — both quite content with just each other's company. But the easy silence that surrounded them had the unintended consequence of relaxing Lovino to the point that his eyes had once again drooped closed. As much as he tried to hide it, the late nights he spent at work really did wear him down.

In the end, Lovino did doze off, but he was jerked awake by Antonio's voice as he called brightly, "Good morning, Feli!"

Feliciano padded quietly into the kitchen, rubbing groggily at his eyes. He sat across the table from his brother, the dark circles under his eyes not escaping the older's notice.

"And just how late were you up last night?" Lovino asked sharply, a glare fixed firmly in place. He observed his brother shift his eyes away guilty, the way he picked at his nails a sure sign that he was nervous.

"Not too late." Feliciano replied meekly.

“Bullshit.”

Feliciano sighed, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, “I was texting a friend and I guess I lost track of time a bit.”

Lost track of time my ass. I didn’t think he was awake when I came home last night, but seeing as to how tired he looks…

Lovino opened his mouth to speak, a reprimand at the ready, when Antonio jumped in first, “Who’s this friend you were texting?”

Feliciano smiled widely, “He’s the one I’ve been working on homework with, his name is Ludwig!” he sang brightly, completely forgetting about the lecture that he was *most definitely getting later.*

“Well we’re glad that you’re making friends, aren’t we Lovi?” Antonio prompted, looking at Lovino expectantly.

“Yeah, I’m glad.” he said, truly meaning it.

Though I’d be more glad if this friend let you sleep instead of texting until the early hours of the morning.

Lovino left that part unsaid, not having the heart to put a damper on his brother’s proud smile.

Breakfast went along just as normal, and it was in seemingly no time that Lovino was walking Feliciano down the stairwell and out the door. It was still early, the sun not having the time to warm the crisp air quite yet. Despite that, it was pleasant out, not that Lovino was in the proper mood to enjoy the beautiful weather.

No, he was too focused on the way his brother’s eyes dangerously fell closed before he could snap them back open. Even the way he staggered clumsily down the sidewalk betrayed just how exhausted he was.

With a huff, Lovino decided it was high time he said something about it, “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you. Just what were you texting about that kept you up so late?”

Feliciano sighed, crossing his arms defensively across his chest, “Stop being so dramatic, I wasn’t up *that* late.”

Lovino scoffed, “Well whatever you were texting about was obviously important enough to keep you up all night. Look at you, you’re exhausted!”

Feliciano shrugged rather flippantly, apparently feeling no remorse for his actions.

His attitude was dismissive, and Lovino was getting annoyed. He opened his mouth, intent on expressing his irritation, when Feliciano cut him off:

“Well you’re exhausted every day, but you refuse to acknowledge it.” he mumbled under his breath, but the way he said it indicated that he wanted to be heard.

Lovino recoiled just the slightest bit, glaring confusedly at his brother.

Damn brat, what is with this attitude today?

“I’m not the one that needs to be up in the morning to go to school. If you’re tired like this every day, then how can you expect to get good grades?” Lovino said pointedly.

“I’m doing fine in my classes.” Feliciano said tersely. “And if you haven’t noticed, you’re up every morning too, and you’re up later than anybody!” he argued, his tone growing more irritated with each word.

Lovino breathed in deeply, praying silently for God to grant him patience, “That’s different.”

“How? You work yourself into the ground without a word, and nobody says anything about it, then I stay up just a *little* too late and all of a sudden I’ve crossed the line?” Feliciano hands gesticulated wildly as he threw the accusation out.

Lovino was steadily losing patience as he clenched his hands at his side, “You aren’t listening to me, you-”

“I do listen to you.” Feliciano bit out, his own hands clenched tightly at his sides. “But you don’t listen to *me,* Lovi. I’m not some little kid anymore.”

“I never said you were, but you can’t be staying up late every night like that.” Lovino growled, trying to pull the argument back to its original topic.

But Feliciano refused to be pulled, “You’re the one to talk. Seriously, why have you been walking me to school every day?” he grumbled childishly, and if they hadn’t been walking then Lovino had little doubt that he would have stomped his foot like the child he denied he was.

“I already told you, it’s safer if we go together.” Lovino said firmly.

“Well, I can do it on my own!” Feliciano ranted, “If I wanted your help, then I would have asked for it!”

Alright, that’s it.

Lovino came to a halt, forcing his brother to stop next to him, “You better listen up real good, ‘cause I ain’t saying this again — shut your damn *mouth.*” he growled the last word, eyes snapping up to meet his brother’s.

Feliciano shuddered at the tone, realizing too late that he may have stepped on a bomb.

Good, I have the brat’s attention.

“I do what I have to to keep us alive and *safe.* If that means shadowing your ass everywhere you go, then you better get fucking used to it. You are *my* responsibility, and I’ll be damned if I let anything interfere with that.” There was a fire in Lovino’s eyes as he said those words, smoldering as he willed his brother to understand.

The bold words seemed to subdue Feliciano’s previous anger, his posture morphing into one of shame. He looked timidly down to the sidewalk and started to pick harshly at his nails.

Lovino was rather pleased that he had gotten through to him with minimal effort on his end, but he wasn’t quite done, “I want you to give your phone to Antonio before you go to bed since you’re obviously too tired to control your attitude.”

Feliciano looked indignant for a single moment before his expression immediately morphed into one of resignation, accepting his fate. He wasn’t nearly as strong-willed as his older brother, a fact that worried Lovino. He normally wouldn’t stand up for himself, this combative attitude something of a rarity.

Idiot, I don’t want to punish you, but you’re really forcing me here. Seriously, what the hell is with this attitude?

With one last fleeting glance, Lovino turned and made his way down the sidewalk. Feliciano trailed silently behind him after a brief moment of hesitation. The walk carried on in silence, both parties lost to their own thoughts.

They finally made it to Feliciano’s school, but before the teen had the chance to slip away, Lovino clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder and squeezed, “Have a good day, text me if you need anything.”

Feliciano nodded, still looking meekly to the sidewalk. He bit nervously at his lip and then, in a shocking turn of events, he surged forward to surprise Lovino with a short hug before scurrying away without another word.

Lovino stood bewildered for a brief moment before smirking. He watched his brother’s retreating figure disappear into the large building, shaking his head quietly to himself.

Idiot brother…

He turned on his heel to head back to the apartment, still feeling a little miffed, but no longer angry. Lovino checked the time and was pleased to note that he would definitely have time to speak with Antonio before he left for the day. Hopefully his airheaded boyfriend could provide some insight on what had just happened.

Lovino returned back to their little apartment, noting with relief that Antonio was indeed still home. He was currently curled up on the couch watching the news, and it was without a single word to announce himself that Lovino marched over and plopped down heavily beside him.

Antonio promptly put the television on mute before taking in his boyfriend's vexed mood, "Uh-oh, that's not a very happy face." He smirked playfully, reaching over in an attempt to force Lovino's lips upwards with his fingers.

Lovino swatted the hands away, instantly recalling his earlier irritation, "It's my idiot brother — he basically exploded on me today."

"Really? That doesn't sound like Feli…" Antonio trailed off thoughtfully.

Lovino threw his hands up in exasperation,"That's what I thought. He copped quite the fucking attitude with me today."

A sly grin snaked its way onto Antonio's face, "*Hmm*, wonder where he gets that from."

"Bastard, that's not the point." Lovino groused. "I called his ass out for not sleeping last night and he went off about how it shouldn't matter because apparently *I'm* the one who doesn't sleep and therefore I have no right to tell him off!" he finished in a huff, unable to quell the rising sense of anger (read: worry) in his chest.

Antonio sat pensively for a few moments before responding, "Well, is he wrong?"

"Excuse me?" Lovino shot back sharply.

"I mean about the not sleeping." Antonio clarified. "I don't think Feli should have blown up, but to me it just sounds like he's worried."

"That's different." Lovino muttered, not realizing that he was echoing his words from earlier.

Antonio didn't look convinced, "I don't understand how. You worry about him and his wellbeing, and he worries about you too. Why are his concerns any less valid?"

"Ugh, they're not. That's not what I meant it's just…" Lovino paused trying to adequately convey what he was feeling, "It's not that I don't think he's allowed to worry about me, it's just that he shouldn't have to."

"Ah, I think I get it." Antonio nodded in apparent understanding, "You're trying to take care of everything by yourself again."

"That's not it, bastard. It's just..." Lovino suddenly looked down, glaring at a fixed point on the ground. He bit at his lip, trying to figure out how much he was willing to reveal at this point, "Recent events may have made me a little paranoid, alright?" he finally forced out.

Antonio gazed at him curiously,"Recent events? You mean the phone calls?"

"Yeah, I'm getting called constantly." Lovino sighed, pulling his knees up to his chest when he suddenly felt exhausted. "Putting it on silent doesn't even seem to help because I still see my phone light up every time."

I can't even fucking sleep anymore. I swear I'm going to chuck that demon-device at the wall.

Antonio stared at him in blatant concern. Lovino got next to no sleep as it was, and if whoever calling him was depriving him of what little sleep he was able to get, then Antonio was prepared to hunt the mystery caller down himself.

Lovino shifted nervously when the concerned staring persisted, “Don’t look at me like that, basta-”

“Who’s calling you?” Antonio cut him off firmly. “And don’t you dare try to tell me that it’s a wrong number again.” he said, a hint of steel entering his voice.

Lovino hugged his knees a little tighter, weighing the pros and cons of sharing the details of the harassment he was suffering through.

He might be able to help if I tell him. Then again, it might just worry him even more. But I don’t want to keep him in the dark either, the dumbass would just make up some worst-case scenario… even though it already is one…

Lovino mentally debated with himself, appreciative of the fact that Antonio simply waited patiently for him. He finally settled on telling the truth, but it didn’t make it any easier to say. Lovino sighed heavily, resting his chin on top of his knees as he breathed out delicately, “It’s my father.”

Of all the things Antonio expected to hear, that was not even close to being it. He sat in dumbfounded silence, adamantly refusing to process what he had just been told. But the short bout of denial was quick to wear off, and Antonio was suddenly launching off the couch as he exploded, “How in the *fuck* did that asshole find us?”

Lovino jumped at the sudden vitriol, although he should have expected it. Antonio was livid, fighting to stay in control of his actions — honestly, Lovino would love to be spitting profanities right there with him, but he was just so tired. He was being harassed day and night by a man that he never thought he would hear from again, the result of which was positively draining.

Scrubbing at his eyes at the sudden moisture there, Lovino was finally able to give a response, “I don’t know, I thought we left that bastard in Italy for good.”

Antonio whipped around with wild eyes, “What did he want?”

Realizing that he wasn’t coming down from his rage any time soon, Lovino decided to put a stop to those dangerous emotions before somebody lashed out, “Before I tell you anything else, you need to calm the fuck down.”

“Calm down?” Antonio scoffed. “How am I supposed to calm down? How are *you* so calm right now?”

Lovino locked his own incensed eyes with his enraged boyfriend’s, making a conscious effort to say evenly, “Trust me, I’m more pissed than you could ever know, but I really need you to keep your head on right now.”

The words carried out their intended purpose, and slowly Antonio was able to come down from his rage. He all but collapsed next to Lovino on the couch, still seething, but no longer quite so murderous — although Lovino was willing to bet that he'd go right back into rampage mode by what he was about to say next.

Lovino wordlessly reached out and intertwined their hands, a precautionary move against the inevitable wrath that was going to follow. He kept his voice carefully neutral, even if he couldn't completely mask the slight wobble there, "He's threatening to take Feliciano away from me. He says that the law's on his side, and that he's going to take back custody of him."

Predictably, Antonio's face tensed with immeasurable rage. Really, Lovino had no doubt that he would have launched off the couch again had their hands not been tangled together.

"He can't do this." Antonio growled, closing his eyes in a desperate attempt to stay calm.

"Not if I have anything to say about it. That bastard will not lay a *single fucking finger* on my brother." Lovino said with conviction, eyes alight with incandescent fury.

Antonio shook his head vehemently, "Not if I have anything to say about it, either. I swear to God I will annihilate him if he tries."

Lovino was touched by how seriously his boyfriend was taking this, though it really wasn't that much of a surprise. Despite his usual happy-go-lucky demeanor, Antonio was about as passionate as they come and would fight tooth and nail to protect his loved ones.

Let's see that bastard just try any shady shit. I'll just sic Toni on him. Lovino thought with satisfaction.

They sat tensely on the couch together, the explosive anger that had gripped the both of them dissipating little by little. The implications of what was happening was slowly being processed, and Antonio, ever the considerate one, set his worry on Lovino as soon as he could think clearly, "How are you handling this, Lovi?"

Lovino snorted, "About as well as possible. The first day when I got that phone call, I had a meltdown after you left for work."

"Is that why there's a dent in our wall?" Antonio asked, the ghost of his normal teasing self returning.

"It might be." Lovino huffed, sticking his nose up childishly in the air.

Antonio laughed at the characteristic reply, although it sounded tense.

The room descended into a taut silence, the previous emotional outburst having depleted both of them of all energy. Lovino's eyes glazed over as the silence only persisted, losing himself to the darkest parts of his mind. There was a reason he was terrified at the notion of his brother going back to their father, and in the still hush of the living room, Lovino nearly choked on his own broken whisper, "Toni, I'm scared."

Antonio's face crumpled at the words, having hardly heard them for how quietly they were uttered. Lovino never admitted weakness or uncertainty. Ever. Yet here he was, curled up on the couch staring blankly ahead as his whole world crashed around him.

Lovino's vision was growing blurry with tears, his shoulders hitching up when Antonio gripped him by the shoulders to hug him close. He felt like he was spiraling, the realization that he could truly lose his brother filling him with despair.

I can't lose him to that bastard. Not after all that he put us through, I just can't.

Lovino finally allowed himself to melt into Antonio's embrace, feeling every bit his young age. The pressure he was under was immense, overwhelming, and he felt that it might crush him at any moment.

Antonio ran delicate fingers through his distraught boyfriend's hair, whispering back just as gently, "I know you're scared, but we'll figure it out. We always do."

And Lovino wanted to believe that those words held some truth to them. He *desperately* wanted to believe that it would all work out in the end, but he couldn't seem to trust that they would come out of this intact.

He felt hot tears well up at the corners of his eyes as he choked out, "I can't lose him too, not after grandpa. It would *kill* me, Toni. I can't do it-" His words were cut off as his throat constricted. It was getting too hard to hold it together, so he just buried his face in Antonio's chest and tried to will away the hopelessness he was feeling.

Antonio dragged a hand lightly across the length of Lovino's back in what he hoped was a calming gesture, "*Shh*, I know. We won't lose him, Lovi, I swear it."

With a helpless little nod, Lovino squeezed his eyes shut in a wild hope that this was all some kind of horrible nightmare. He wanted to wake up, but he just couldn't seem to forget about this awful reality.

Antonio's face was pinched in worry, and it was without a second thought that he discreetly pulled out his phone to text his manager. There was no way that he would leave Lovino alone in his current state — he would just pick up an extra shift that weekend.

After a great many (failed) attempts to reign in his overwrought mind, Lovino looked up with a dazed expression. He was both physically and mentally exhausted, and was in clear need of a nap.

Apparently recognizing this fact, Antonio stood and scooped his fiery boyfriend up in his arms. He was not met with any resistance as he walked them into their room, placing Lovino gently down onto the bed. With a short nod of satisfaction, Antonio turned on his heel to walk away, but was stopped in his tracks when a hand tangled into the hem of his shirt.

Lovino looked up at him, expression impossibly lost as he whispered, "Please, stay."

There was no universe in which Antonio could say *no* to that small voice. So he didn't, instead laying down to pull the covers over both of them.

Lovino snuggled close, pushing his head underneath the Spaniard's chin with a quiet sigh of relief. He kept his eyes closed, feeling the gentle *thump* of Antonio's heart lull him into a numb stupor. They were both on the precipice of sleep, but just as they were about to drop off the edge of consciousness, Lovino needed to say, "Don't tell Feli. This isn't something that he should be worrying about."

Antonio nodded in agreement, pulling the smaller closer to his own body until they were pushed flush against each other. The warmth was comforting, each finding solace in each other.

Hopefully his father was only bluffing, although Lovino seriously doubted it. That awful man was willing to do anything to get what he wanted. He knew that they would have to tell Feliciano what was happening eventually, but Lovino thought it was best to leave him in blissful ignorance for as long as possible.

Even if he couldn't run from this forever, Lovino could at least protect his precious brother from the worst of it. He had no other option — he would rather die before he saw Feliciano back in the hands of that despicable man.

Don't worry Feli, I'll take care of us.

Desperately hoping that he could keep that promise, Lovino forced the tautness out of his body. He willed himself to become numb, finally allowing his body to relax fully as he was swept under the tumultuous waves of a restless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

I present to you the longest chapter of the story yet! I opted to write from Lovi's point of view and I hope that it cleared up why he acts the way that he does.

In other news, plot twist! I sure hope that I got somebody with it, though I bet a bunch of you had already figured out who the mystery caller was.

As always, thank you so much for reading. I am grateful to y'all for sticking around with this story for so long, I am having a freaking blast writing it.

I absolutely loved writing from Lovino's perspective, so let me know if you liked it because I would love to do it again!

Till next time!

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The weekend came and went far too quickly for Feliciano, who spent the majority of his time ignoring the stack of homework stuffed haphazardly in his backpack. It was now Sunday afternoon, and he had yet to start any of it.

I guess I should get at least some of it done now. Feliciano thought, sighing as he picked his bag off the bedroom floor and made his way out to the kitchen table.

Once there, he started pulling out his assignments, most of which he had to smooth out flat on the table to work out the creases. He dug around in his bag for something to write with, groaning in frustration when his blind grabbing was inhibited by a rather sizable stack of papers. He pulled out the packet, eyes going wide when he realized what it was.

Oh, it's the application for the library! I totally forgot about that.

Feliciano looked over the application, flipping through some of the pages. It mostly asked for basic information about himself, including what kind of hours he was willing to work. He reached back down into his backpack, humming to himself in victory when he finally found a pen. He began filling in what information he could, so engrossed in his task that he didn't hear when somebody walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning." grumbled an exhausted voice.

Feliciano turned in his seat, watching in concern as his brother trudged in. His movements were slow and heavy, even the way he fumbled with the coffee pot was clumsy. Feliciano felt a bit of guilt at that, turning to check the time before saying, "It's three o'clock, Lovi. You missed morning by hours."

"Whatever." was the gruff reply.

Lovino leaned on the counter as he watched his coffee brew, eyes glazed over in exhaustion. Things had been a little tense in the apartment since their fight on Friday — *was it a fight? More like me losing my temper and taking it out on Lovi* — but despite that, they had been able to maintain an easy peace. Feliciano still had to give up his phone every night, but everything had been forgiven with relative ease.

With the coffee finally finished, Lovino slumped wearily at the kitchen table. Feliciano noticed bags around his eyes were definitely more pronounced, and recently he had been zoning out so badly that he and Antonio had to physically shake him out of it. On top of that, he was constantly casting his eyes nervously to his phone, jumping at the mere sound of a ringtone.

Feliciano felt ill with regret, his shoulders slumping when he remembered the way he had blown up on his brother.

I can't believe I snapped at him, he sacrifices so much for us.

With a sigh, he returned to his application.

Lovino suddenly sat up, peering curiously across his table to see what his brother was doing, "What's that?"

Feliciano brought his own eyes up, realizing that this was the perfect opportunity to get permission to work at the library, "I actually wanted to talk to you about it."

Lovino gestured vaguely for his brother to continue, "Alright, shoot."

Taking in a deep breath, Feliciano launched into a lengthy explanation, "So basically I was at the library with Ludwig and I saw that they had a sign at the front desk, so I went and asked one of the ladies about it," he recounted, his hands gesticulating wildly. "They were actually really nice to me and said that they had an opening to put books on the shelves, and I thought that it was perfect so they gave me this application. I kind of forgot about it until now, but since we're here, what do you think?" Feliciano finished, bringing in a shuddering breath once his mini-rant was complete.

Lovino took a moment to process the rambling explanation. Feliciano had spoken so quickly that the words seemed to swirl just out of reach around Lovino's sleep-addled mind, and he was having a difficult time sorting things out. Finally, after one last moment of stunned silence, he was able to form a response, "When would you be working?"

Feliciano looked down at the application, "Uh, I put twice a week right after school, and then on saturday."

Lovino slowly nodded, trying to figure out how the schedule would line up with his own. His face twisted in displeasure, but there was also resignation there, "I still don't want you to work, but-" he put a finger up when Feliciano opened his mouth to protest, "I understand why you want to. If it's really so important to you, then I suppose I can accept it."

A smile creeped its way onto Feliciano's face when he realized what his brother was saying, and he would have stood to hug him if it didn't look like he would collapse from the extra weight. Instead, he settled with a bright, "Thank you so much, Lovi!"

Lovino simply crossed his arms with a huff, "Yeah, yeah. I better not hear you complain about it."

Like he would ever complain about this — Feliciano just couldn't wait to finally contribute in a meaningful way. He was glad that his brother was finally coming around, and he briefly wondered if Antonio had spoken some sense into him (he was the only one that could change Lovino's mind).

The kitchen lapsed into an easy silence, only the light shuffle of papers disturbing the relaxed atmosphere. Lovino had almost finished two cups of coffee before Antonio emerged from the bathroom, chocolate curls dripping wet. He joined them at the table, helping Feliciano on his homework where he could. It was comfortable, tranquil.

Feliciano breathed it in, trying to imprint the feeling in his memory to remind himself of what was really important in life.

The rest of the afternoon flew by, nobody really saying anything until dinner that night. They sat around the table for a rare meal where every one of them was present. Oven-made pizza was on the menu that night, each eating with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

“Mmm, ‘dis’s good.” Feliciano said around a mouth full of pizza.

“Oi, chew your food. That’s fucking gross.” Lovino reprimanded, his nose crinkled up in disgust.

Feliciano giggled at the predictable response, but did as he was told.

Antonio, on the other hand, had a different idea, “What’s s’nasty ‘bout it?” He was chomping loudly on his food, mouth wide open as he spoke.

Lovino looked on in horror, his expression an odd mix of anger and disgust, “What the hell? I thought you were the oldest one here, fucking act your age!”

“But why, Lovi?” Antonio shifted in his seat to get closer to his irate boyfriend, smirking when he recoiled away. He took another bite of pizza, once again invading Lovino’s personal space.

“Nuh-uh, get the hell away from me, bastard!” Lovino shrieked, inching away from the obnoxious Spaniard.

Antonio kept pushing forward, “But, Lovi-”

“No!” Lovino kept scooting back, not realizing that he had run out of chair to retreat on, “Antonio, I swear to- *oh shit!”* he screamed as he tumbled from his seat and smacked heavily onto the cold floor below.

Everyone in the kitchen froze, disbelief written clearly on each and every face. Lovino sat on the ground in a tangled mess of limbs, staring up bewildered at the ceiling. Nobody dared to breathe, the air from the room gone.

Antonio was the first to snap out of the spell, staring down with wide eyes. When he finally realized what terrible misfortune had befallen the fiery Italian, he made perhaps the worst possible decision.

He burst out laughing.

“*Pfft!* Oh my goodness, Lovi! I cannot believe you- *Ha!*” Antonio gripped his stomach, unable to get a word out between fits of boisterous laughter.

Lovino watched him with a dazed expression, sitting up slowly as he looked around. He cast his gaze below him in confusion, before bringing his eyes up to stare at Antonio. But as the obnoxious fit of laughter only grew louder, Lovino's face heated up to a bright tomato-red.

"I'm- *ha!*- I'm sorry, are you alr-*oof*-"

"*Bastard!*" Lovino roared as he tackled Antonio to the ground, both of them crashing into the floor.

Feliciano, still firmly in his own seat, watched on in astonishment as his brother was able to pin Antonio — who was much bigger and *much stronger* — to the ground. Lovino was practically sitting on him, chest heaving as he stared down with a fierce glare.

Antonio also seemed to be in a state of shock, his laughter having dissipated completely as he looked fearfully up into his boyfriend's vengeful eyes.

"You, Antonio Fernandez Carriedo, are *dead!*" Lovino bellowed as he brought his hands down to Antonio's sides.

"Lovi, what are you- *Ah!*" Antonio cried as Lovino gripped his sides, right below the ribs. "No, no, anything but that!" he laughed as he desperately tried to claw away.

"How do you like that, asshole?" Lovino shouted, ruthlessly digging into his sides.

Feliciano started laughing from his place at the table, watching in glee as his brother exacted his revenge.

Lovino's head snapped up at the sound, "Oh, so you think it's funny too?" he released Anonio, who curled up on his side as uncontrollable laughter spilled from his lips.

Feliciano's eyes went wide when his brother started creeping closer. Realizing he was in danger, Feliciano tried to placate, "No, no! It's not funny. Lovi? Why are you — wait!" he yelled, launching himself from his seat when Lovino lunged at him.

Lovino chased him around the kitchen, Feliciano staying infuriatingly out of reach. The younger threw himself over the couch, trying to escape the relentless pursuit.

"Get over here, you little shit. You deserve this!" Lovino growled as he made a grab at him again.

"No, stay away!" Feliciano laughed as he evaded his brother's attempts to trap him. Lovino was attempting to corner him, creeping ever closer, when Feliciano found his salvation in the form of a giggly Spaniard.

"Gotcha!" Antonio cried victoriously as he hooked an arm around Lovino's waist and hoisted him up.

Lovino's feet left the ground as he clawed and kicked, trying to free himself, "No, Antonio put me the fuck down! Stop!" His shouts ended in an indignant squeak as he was dumped unceremoniously onto the couch.

“Feli, I’ve got him, counter!” Antonio yelled, struggling to hold Lovino’s flailing limbs still.

Lovino’s thrashing came to a halt when Feliciano approached the couch, a shit-eating grin on his face. Lovino gulped, “You wouldn’t dare.”

Feliciano ran his hands mercilessly up and down Lovino’s sides and stomach, causing him to let out barks of unrestrained laughter. Lovino pulled at the hands that were restraining him, but Antonio held firm.

“Fucking — *Ah!* — knock it off!” Lovino huffed between fits of squeaks and giggles. Feliciano never let up in his attack, watching as Antonio was unable to contain his own mirth.

“Don’t start something you can’t finish, *cariño.*” Antonio smirked, the endearment seeming to add insult to injury. Lovino glared up at him, his eyes promising doom. However, the effect was diminished by the fact that he could hardly speak through his laughter, and the smile on his face refused to be contained.

Finally after the torture was finished, Lovino was released. He instantly curled up to protect his abused abdomen and glared up at his brother and boyfriend, “You are both dead to me.”

Feliciano laughed loudly at that, opting to sit on the floor next to where his brother was curled up on the couch. Antonio sat on the arm of the sofa, placing a hand on Lovino’s head, “Don’t say that, *amado.*” he purred.

“No. You don’t get to fucking call me that right now, traitor.” Lovino whined with a betrayed scowl.

Antonio pouted, “Well you started it.”

Lovino peered up in disbelief, “Fucking *excuse me?*”

Feliciano put a hand over his mouth, trying to suppress his giggling.

“Last I checked, it was *you* who acted like a fucking toddler and caused me to *fall out of the damn chair!*” Lovino screeched.

Antonio had enough tact to look a little sheepish at that, but he was far from apologetic. Feliciano thought he saw a touch of mischief flash through his eyes as he prodded a little further, “I didn’t touch you, Lovi. You fell out all on your own. I was just trying to eat my dinner and before I knew it, I was being viciously attacked!”

“Why you-” Lovino grabbed a pillow from the couch and slammed it into Antonio’s chest, who went careening off the arm of the sofa.

Making the wise decision to stay out of it, Feliciano watched the fight from his spot on the ground — though it wasn’t so much of a fight and more of Lovino throwing insults (and pillows) while Antonio continued to provoke him.

Feliciano grinned widely as the impromptu pillow fight continued. Despite his words, Lovino’s eyes were bright with joy and his shoulders were no longer so tense. Antonio

looked just as untethered, giggling as he dodged the assault of pillows, the smile never leaving his face. Feliciano looked on as that content feeling worked its way into his chest again. He thought in his head that there was nothing that could break their little family, no matter what hardship they faced.

As Feliciano was reflecting silently on the ground, he missed the smirks that were exchanged between the previously clashing combatants. They each brought a hand to one of his ankles and dragged him forward until he was face to face with his brother.

“Don’t think I forgot about you, *fratellino mio.*” Lovino said with an evil gleam in his eyes.

Feliciano blanched as he scrambled to get away.

Lovino chuckled darkly, “Oh no, you’re not getting away this time!”

Chapter End Notes

Woo, finished with finals! Finally I can return to the finer things in life, like writing Hetalia fanfic in 2019.

Anyways, so I thought that we have been pretty dang heavy in the angst, so I wanted to lighten it up a bit. Not to say that the angst is really gonna stop any time soon, but it's good in general to focus on the positives in life.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, let me know what you think!

'Till next time!

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano walked into his literature class Monday morning, listening with mild interest as Alfred and Matthew engaged in their usual bickering. He sat, glancing to his side to find that Ludwig had yet to arrive, so he spent most of his time staring idly ahead. Briefly, he wondered what they would be doing in class that day

We turned in our story already, but Ludwig seems to think there will be a follow-up. I sure hope so, maybe then we can hang out some more…

Feliciano also had his application for the library, completed and stashed safely in his bag. He was trying to come up with a way to convince Antonio to stop by the library with him on the way home when a certain blond took a seat beside him.

“Good morning.” Ludwig said by way of greeting, already laying out his notebook and pencils across his desk in strict fashion.

“Morning! How are you today?” Feliciano all but sang. Loath as he was to admit it, giving up his phone at night had ensured that he actually went to bed at a decent hour. He felt more energized, even if he did miss his late night conversations with Ludwig. Feliciano had a sneaking suspicion that he had been keeping the blond up way past his bedtime, but why Ludwig never cut those conversations short for the sake of his own sleep, Feliciano had no idea.

“I’m well, and you?” Ludwig asked politely

Feliciano bounced excitedly in his seat, “I’m great! I got all my homework done and everything!”

Ludwig nodded, sparing a soft smile for the way the bubbly teen looked so proud of himself, “I’m glad to hear it.”

Feliciano nodded happily, tapping his foot to a melody only he could hear. Even the droning lecture that Mister Kirkland gave couldn’t put a damper on his mood, although the knowing glance Ludwig shot him when they were indeed assigned a follow-up to their story caused him to pout. They were tasked with picking apart their own cliché so they could write an essay about why it’s a poor device to use fictional writing.

When class let out, Feliciano thought that he could see Ludwig try to contain a smirk. He whipped his head around to address the cheeky blond, “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” Ludwig asked lightly, knowing full well what he was doing.

Feliciano glared, “Like you want to say ‘I told you so’!”

Ludwig smirked a little wider, “But I did.”

“Yeah, but you don’t have to make a big deal about it!” Feliciano huffed, throwing his hands in the air.

“I’m not the one throwing a fit.” Ludwig teased good-naturedly.

Shaking his head in disbelief, Feliciano started gathering his things. He smiled to himself, thrilled that Ludwig was starting to come out of his shell around him. On the other hand, the blond definitely had a sassy side that seemed a bit out of character for his otherwise strict personality. Briefly, he wondered where he inherited that trait.

“Yeah, well at least now we can keep seeing each other after school!” Feliciano suddenly recalled, standing back up with a bright smile.

And just like magic, Ludwig was back to acting almost painfully shy. Feliciano marvelled at how he was able to make the blond’s entire demeanor change with just a few words — *only when I mention that I like being around him… what’s up with that?*

They gathered the rest of their things, making their way into the hallway together. Ludwig’s face was still dusted with a slight shade of red, and he was glaring at a fixed point ahead of him. Feliciano thought that, in another life, Ludwig’s cold exterior and scowling face would certainly frighten him. However, he knew that the serious expression the strict teen typically wore was simply a default and not really indicative of his true personality.

Suddenly remembering their new assignment, Feliciano’s face scrunched up in thought, “So I guess we need to figure out a time to meet again.”

“*Ja*, I guess we do.” Ludwig breathed, still glaring at a fixed point ahead.

“Well we could always just go to the library again.” Feliciano said logically, looking to the blond for approval. But the way Ludwig’s face suddenly turned displeased caused the Italian to instantly backtrack, “I mean unless you don’t want to! I know that we’ve been spending a lot of time together and I know that I’m annoying, so we don’t have to if you don’t want to! I bet Mister Kirkland would let us switch-”

“Woah, woah. Easy, that’s not what I was thinking.” Ludwig placated, putting a hand up to stop the anxious rambling.

“It’s not?” Feliciano asked hopefully.

“*Nein.*” Ludwig took in a deep breath, “I was talking to my brother and he says that he wants to meet you. So I thought that maybe you could come over some time and we could work on our paper?” his voice rose in pitch towards the end, phrasing the statement more like a question.

Feliciano processed the new information. His first thought was: *he talked about me to his brother?* and the second thought he gave voice to, “I would love to!”

Ludwig had a relieved little smile on his face, “I can show you where our apartment is at whatever time we decide to go.”

Feliciano nodded his head excitedly, already looking forward to it.

I’ll have to get permission from Lovi. He’s been really weird about me being alone, but I’ll be with Ludwig the whole time so it should be fine!

They split up with the promise to see each other at lunch. Feliciano spent the next couple class periods lost in a happy daze, counting every blessing that has graced him since he moved to this city.

Feliciano bounded into his art class, instantly choosing a seat next to Kiku as he pulled out his supplies. He was buzzing excitedly — as was the rest of the class — knowing that they were receiving their first major project today.

As if expecting that excited energy of the class, their eccentric teacher burst into the room with a bright cry of, "*Bonjour!"*

Francis waltzed to the front of the room, fixing his class with a dazzling smile, “As you know, today you will receive your first major assignment.” he paused, watching as his students leaned closer in anticipation. Francis seemed to love the suspense he created, relishing in his own melodrama. Finally, when it looked as though the students were going to outright demand to know what the project was, he spoke, “I want you to think of someone very important to you and draw a portrait of them.”

A portrait? I haven’t done one of those in a long time…

They were instructed to begin working, and they were also informed that they had the next three class periods to work on the project.

Feliciano twirled a pencil in his hand, glancing over to find that Kiku had his head down, frantically sketching as if the image in his head was only a fleeting thing. He glanced back down at his own pad of paper, lip jutting out in thought.

An important person?

Well that was a rather vague instruction, at least it was to Feliciano. He himself had many people in his life he considered important. His friends and family were precious to him, and singling just one of them out seemed unfair.

Feliciano bit at his lip, agonizing over the decision. He mentally ran through the people in his life that he thought were important, starting with his brother, then Antonio, and of course there was also…

“Oh!” Feliciano cried in realization.

To his side, Kiku looked up in quiet concern, letting his eyes ask the question.

“Ah, *mi dispiace,* I’m alright.” Feliciano reassured with a small smile. He felt stupid, and just a little guilty, for not thinking of it sooner. His late grandfather wasn’t just an important person to Feliciano, Roma was his hero.

He bent over his pad of paper, sketching furiously from memory. He remembered how gentle his grandfather had been, his endless patience easing the worst of Feliciano’s fears and anxieties. Both he and his brother had been in a dark place when they moved in with him, but their grandfather hadn’t shied away when things were at their worst. Sometimes, when Feliciano had felt overcome with the weight of his past, Roma would sit on the couch with an arm around him and just listen. He was a great listener. Lovino would join them on the couch most nights, and they would just sit and be together.

Feliciano smiled softly as his pencil seemed to move on its own. He reminisced about when they had first left Italy, how everything was so uncertain and utterly terrifying. Roma had taught them to take it one day at a time with a fearless smile.

Although Lovi has trouble with the smiling part.

He laughed lightly at the thought, but the sound was tinged with melancholy and grief. Feliciano sighed sadly as he continued to sketch.

I miss him a lot.

Tears welled up in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. He thought that Roma wouldn’t like it very much if he kept crying over him — *No more tears, Feli. It’s a beautiful day, there’s so much in this wonderful life to celebrate!* — was what Roma would say, his voice sounding far too young for his old age.

His voice.

Feliciano paused in his sketching, trying to recall the sound of his grandfather’s voice. He remembered how he had always spoken with energy, *but what did it sound like?*

He floundered, struggling to conjure up just and inkling of what Roma’s voice was like — the tone he would use, the pitch, *anything.*

Feliciano desperately fought for a memory that would reveal their grandfather’s voice, his grip on his pencil becoming painfully tight. He sifted through his memories, distressed to find that he couldn’t remember how the man had sounded. He could see each memory with startling clarity, but every time Roma opened his mouth to speak, not a sound escaped his lips.

No, I can’t be forgetting him already. Oh Dio, he can’t die in my memories too!

Feliciano’s chest heaved, his pencil frozen over where Roma’s mouth would be on the portrait. He let the pencil slide from his grip as he brought both hands up to pull loosely at his hair.

No, no, no, I can’t remember. What if I forget his face next?

That thought almost sent Feliciano into a full-blown panic as his fingers curled painfully into his hair. He wasn't even aware how harshly he was pulling, the disgust he felt about himself being far too prominent in his mind.

"... Feli- … are you … Hey!"

Feliciano's head snapped up, finally registering that somebody, *Kiku,* was trying to get his attention.

"Are you okay?" Kiku's eyes bore into his.

"O-oh, uh…" Feliciano coughed into his hand, trying to dislodge the lump that had formed in his throat, "Y-yeah, sorry. I'm just…" he turned his head away, avoiding eye contact completely, "I'm fine."

Kiku nodded slowly, wanting to prod further but was prevented by his own politeness.

Feliciano was quickly zoning out, not even noticing how Kiku had stopped in his own drawing to monitor him. Everything felt fuzzy, and his eyes glazed over as he mentally berated himself.

I'm horrible. I'm disgusting. Awful. Bad. Ungrateful. Roma gave us everything and I can't even remember him. I don't deserve to be his grandson.

His thought spiralled, his sense of time warping into something completely detached from reality. Everything felt like a dream, almost like he was watching himself through some crooked lens. Needless to say, Feliciano did not pick up his pencil again.

The hazy, dreamlike spell that Feliciano waded through persisted for the rest of the day. He was completely detached to the point where his gym teacher sent him to the nurse's office. Feliciano shuffled silently away, missing the look of blatant concern a certain blond shot him as he disappeared down the hallway.

He spent the duration of the class period in the nurse's office, curling up on the padded bench they kept in there. The nurse had originally said that he was fine, but one look into his eyes had brought about a swift change of opinion. Feliciano thought he heard her mention something about dissociation, but he couldn't be sure.

The final bell rang, and Feliciano was released from the tranquil office. He ambled listlessly out of the school, finding Antonio waiting for him outside:

"Feli! How was your day?" he intoned happily.

Feliciano brought his gaze up slowly, meeting Antonio with bleary eyes.

Something like worry flashed across the Spaniard's face, his smile falling from his face just as quickly as he had put it there, "Ah, not good then. That's alright, let's just go home, *sí?*" he didn't wait for an answer, he simply placed a hand around Feliciano's shoulders as he started guiding him down the sidewalk.

Antonio chatted mindlessly about anything he could think of as they walked, keeping that arm firmly around Feliciano's shoulders. His grip never wavered, and Feliciano noted distantly that he appreciated the anchor that was unintentionally — *or maybe intentionally?* — created.

Lovino was waiting for them in the apartment, whipping around when the two finally ambled in. He marched his way up to his brother and boyfriend in a huff, "Why am I getting calls from your school about…" he cut himself off when he took in the state his brother was in, "Feli?"

Antonio pulled the teen closer to his side, "Lovi, now's not really the time."

Shaking his head to himself, Lovino truly scrutinized the younger. The dazed look, watery eyes, and most noticeable of all, the horrible *stillness* Feliciano never stood so motionlessly. He was almost always buzzing with nervous energy, or picking anxiously at his nails — he was *never* this still.

Without a word, Lovino stepped forward and cupped his brother's face gently in his hands, "Hey, look at me." Feliciano brought his eyes up slowly, almost robotically, and Lovino immediately knew what was wrong with him.

Feliciano was an echo of himself, not really existing in the moment. He allowed himself to be led by the hand into the living room where he was directed to sit on the couch. Distantly he noted that Antonio had disappeared to the back of the apartment, returning with a blanket. Lovino took it, wrapping around Feliciano's shoulders. He watched everything with a detached sort of interest, he himself no longer an active participant in his own life.

Lovino sat on the couch next to his brother and immediately gathered him in his arms, trying to provide a sense of security. Antonio sat on the other side, waiting to assist in any way that he could.

They simply sat like that for a long while — just how long, Feliciano really couldn't tell. Time passed oddly, reality being wholly unreal at the moment. But he was eventually able to focus on the softness of the blanket around his shoulders, the warmth of the hug around him, even the gentle *thump* of his brother's heart helping him regain consciousness. He ever so slightly gripped Lovino back, turning his head to bury it in his shoulder.

Lovino, presumably feeling the movement, looked down with a relieved little sigh. He slowly brought his hand up to run it through Feliciano's hair, deciding that the younger was finally lucid enough to register his questions, "Feli, you don't have to talk if you don't want to, but I really need to know what happened so I can help."

I can't tell him, he'll think I'm horrible.

Terrified at the thought, Feliciano desperately shook his head. He felt those damn tears threatening to spill over again, but he once again refused to let them fall.

"Hey, it's okay. You don't have to say anything." Lovino gently reassured, continuing to run a soothing hand through the younger's hair.

Feliciano was beyond relieved, curling up tighter on the couch as more of his surroundings registered with him. He felt as Antonio stood from the couch, hearing as he fiddled with something in the kitchen for a few minutes before returning. He pushed a cup of something warm into Feliciano's hands, the sweet aroma of hot chocolate drifting through.

He sipped from the cup, the warmth of the drink spreading through his body. The sensation brought him back completely from his previously detached state, and he was finally able to find his voice after the cup was nearly empty, "I'm sorry."

Lovino tightened his grip around him, chiding firmly, "Nope, none of that. There is nothing to be sorry for."

Feliciano shook his head as he tried to explain, "No, you don't understand. I'm awful, I don't deserve any of this." he gestured to the cozy little nest they had formed on the couch.

"Why do you think that, Feli?" Antonio breathed, obviously upset by the words.

I'm forgetting Grandpa Roma, what if I forget you guys too? You're all I have left, I don't want you to leave me as soon as you find out how awful I am. is what he wanted to say, but Feliciano had already snapped his mouth shut, refusing to share more. He thought that if he shared what was really wrong, he would be met with disdain or disgust for forgetting perhaps the most important person in all of their lives.

Oh Dio, I don't want to be alone.

Feliciano was sending himself into a panic as he wandered to the darkest corners of his mind. He was afraid to be lost in the dark, and absently he wished he could detach himself again, finding this reality to be too painful to bear. But he couldn't, so instead he gripped his brother's hand and Antonio's arm as he whispered, "Just talk. Please, about anything, I don't like the quiet."

Antonio audibly gulped, turning to face Lovino who only nodded in response. The two began to converse right of Feliciano's head, never sticking to a single topic for more than a few minutes. They covered anything from the weather, to the decrepit state of their apartment, both of them casting an appraising eye to the younger nestled tensely between them.

Feliciano closed his eyes as he soaked in the mindless chatter, finding that it soothed some of his frayed nerves. He took the opportunity to regain his bearings, the soft conversation over his head ensuring that he stayed grounded as he acclimated himself back to reality. His shoulders slumped down in relief when the last of the haze began to fade, and he was finally able to get out, "Thank you, I'm alright now."

Lovino looked a little unsure, but nonetheless helped his brother to sit up on his own. Feliciano pushed himself up on shaky feet, swaying slightly where he stood as he tried to figure out what to do next. He still felt guilty for forgetting his grandfather, and he could honestly say that he didn't like himself very much at that moment, but on the whole he was less panicked.

With a shaky intake of breath, Feliciano attempted to take a step forward as he said, “I’m really tired, I think I’m just going to go to bed.”

Lovino stood as well, halting his brother’s attempts to get away by putting a hand on his shoulder, “Actually, I think I would prefer for you to stay out here right now.”

Feeling just a tad annoyed, Feliciano tried to shrug him off, “I said I’m alright, why can’t I go to my room?”

“Uh, I’m actually with Lovi on this one.” Antonio chimed in, pushing himself up and off the couch. “I really don’t think you should be alone right now.”

Looking in between the two, Feliciano realized that he had lost the argument before it had even started. He sighed in exasperation, but flopped back down on the couch with a mumbled, “Fine.”

Nodding in apparent satisfaction, Antonio turned to make his way into the kitchen, “I’m going to make dinner, is there anything you would like?”

“Not hungry.” Feliciano mumbled, staring up at a fixed point on the ceiling.

Lovino sighed, walking away to join Antonio in the kitchen. There was some faint rustling, and a bit of hushed arguing before the sound of water sloshing in a pot indicated that they had started cooking their dinner.

Feliciano kicked his shoes off and curled on his side to face the back of the couch. The blanket he had discarded earlier sat at his feet, and he reached down to wrap it firmly around his shoulders. He allowed his eyes to fall closed, drifting in and out of sleep before he was prodded awake by a gentle voice:

“Hey, you need to eat something.”

“Said ‘m not hungry.” Feliciano mumbled.

“And I said that you need to eat something, c’mon.”

Grumbling to himself, Feliciano peeled his eyes open and found that his brother was hovering over him with a plate in his hand. Lovino watched him warily, but still forced him to sit up as he shoved his dinner — noodles and vegetables — onto his lap.

“Eat at least half of it.” Lovino instructed firmly.

Realizing he wasn’t getting out of this, Feliciano began mindlessly scooping food into his mouth. To his side, Antonio sat and began eating his own meal, offering short encouragements when the teen hesitated to eat.

The second he had eaten half the meal, Feliciano put his fork down. Lovino removed the plate from his hands, also collecting Antonio’s finished plate, and placing the dishes into the sink. He returned, settling down once more on the couch.

All three of them sat in silence, most likely waiting for Feliciano to say something. However, when it was evident that the teen was intent on holding his silence indefinitely, Lovino spoke up, “I was serious about you not having to tell if you don’t want to, but I think it might help if you talk about it.”

Feliciano pulled his knees to his chest, still terrified of rejection. He owed his brother at least something of an explanation, but first he needed to know something. With a shuddering breath, he finally asked, “Do you think I'm a bad person?”

Lovino’s eyes shot wide open, “Of course not, why would you think that you were?”

Feliciano shrugged, keeping his eyes downcast as he whispered, “Just… sometimes I think that I’m not very good.”

“Feli, look at me” Lovino demanded, craning his neck to catch his brother’s elusive eyes, “You are good. I swear to God if somebody said anything to you then-”

“Do you remember Grandpa Roma, Lovi?” Feliciano interjected, stunning his brother into silence. “ ‘Cause sometimes I think that I’m forgetting him. It’s only been a few months and I’m already forgetting him, how horrible is that?” he sniffled, finally letting those pained tears fall.

Lovino wasn’t completely sure how to respond to that, but he was willing to try anyway. He brought a hand up to his brother’s cheek and gently wiped the tears away, “Hey, none of that now. Yeah I remember him, he was our savior.”

Feliciano nodded in agreement, unconsciously leaning into the warm hand on his cheek.

With a small smile, Lovino began to reminisce, “He had bright eyes and the most obnoxious smile I’ve ever seen.” he snorted lightly at his own description, shaking his head to himself before continuing, “He was warm, too. I swear that man was a furnace. Do you remember how he always had to keep a window propped open?”

“Sì, even in the winter.” Feliciano sniffled.”It was so cold in the house, but just sitting next to him would warm you right up.”

Lovino nodded, “Yeah, I remember falling asleep next to him, only to wake up feeling like I was on fire. Pissed me off every time.”

Feliciano giggled, “He always did say that you needed to loosen up.”

“Yeah, the bastard.” Lovino grumbled. “ If you ask me then he was far too easy-going.”

“Everyone is easy-going compared to you, Lovi.” Feliciano pointed out, noting with some amusement that Antonio was failing to muffle his laughter at the comment.

“Oi, I can relax! I just choose not to.” Lovino growled, glaring when he received disbelieving looks from both his boyfriend and brother. He crossed his arms in a huff, “Fucking whatever.”

Feliciano smiled up at his brother, leaning his head to rest on his shoulder. Silence descended on them once more, but it wasn't so tense this time as they remembered a time long gone. Things had spiralled so quickly since Roma's death, none of them having the time to properly grieve in the flurry of activity directly following the funeral. It was difficult to keep up sometimes, soft moments like these depressingly rare for them to have.

"He had a beautiful voice." Lovino suddenly said softly. "He was always singing, I swear he couldn't stand to be quiet for more than a second."

It was like one of his memories was suddenly unlocked at the words, and Feliciano gasped softly when he could recall an inkling of his grandfather's voice.

It was always so bright, like he was untouchable. It was confident and always so full of life…

There, in his mind, he could see Roma humming as he cooked over the stove. Though he was growing old and frail in his final months, his voice never wavered. But the man could never hum for long, and it was in the next moment that he was putting lyrics to the soft tune he had been weaving. It was so vivid, almost tangible, and Feliciano turned to his brother with just a touch of desperation, "Lovi, do you remember any of the songs that he would sing?"

Lovino looked a bit embarrassed, a light dusting of red coloring his cheeks as he mumbled, "Uh, sort of."

"Can you sing one of them?" Feliciano begged, reaching down to take his hand in a tight grip. When he was met with an unsure expression, he tacked on, "Please?"

Lovino still looked embarrassed, and for a moment it seemed as though he was going to refuse the desperate plea. But in the end, he was able to push his own discomfort to the side before he began singing a simple tune in their native tongue.

Feliciano closed his eyes, letting the song wash over him. The Italian was sparking more memories of visiting Roma while they still lived in Italy. He would always sing when he was walking through the vineyards, and again to distract his grandsons when it stormed. Feliciano began crying as more memories crashed into him, the feeling of relief overwhelming. He thought that Lovino also had a beautiful voice, the way he could bring the wonderful song that spoke of green fields and a promise of a better day to life.

That would be just like Roma, singing about how beautiful life was.

Wiping away some of his tears with the back of his hand, Feliciano slumped fully into his brother's side. Lovino continued to sing as the younger drifted off, his head filled with music and sunlight. He dreamed of his brother and of his grandfather living together in Italy. But this time, when Roma spoke, his voice was no longer silent. It was warm and rich and spoke of hope — *'There's so much in this wonderful life to celebrate. Smile and take it one day at a time.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey y'all, here's a Monday night treat courtesy of moi.

This one got really personal for me. When I started forgetting certain details about one of my loved ones who had passed, it really messed with me. I hope it doesn't sound melodramatic or insincere the way Feliciano is freaking out. I know it seems like such a small detail to freak out over, but trauma can do funny things to you.

Oof, that got a little heavy. I hope you enjoyed the chapter, let me know what you think! I would just like to say thank you again for giving this story a chance and sticking with it <3.

'Till next time!

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Translations at the bottom!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ludwig observed as Feliciano shuffled listlessly out of the gymnasium, the fidgety teen looking so lost that it took all of his self-control not to march right up to him and demand what was wrong. However, he was (barely) able to restrain himself in favor of shooting vaguely concerned looks across the gym.

Did something happen? He seemed fine at lunch. Ludwig thought, trying to pinpoint if anything had happened between the last time he had seen him and now. But nothing came readily to mind, so the blond was left to stew in his own worry as he resigned himself to text Feliciano later.

Class that day went along slowly, Ludwig hardly remembering what they did. He was far too preoccupied with the uncharacteristic despondency a certain bubbly Italian had exhibited, finding the lifeless manner in which he moved deeply disturbing. The final bell rang, leaving Ludwig to amble contemplatively home.

He kept his eyes trained carefully on the chipped and uneven sidewalk below. The dull gray walkway didn't provide much of a visual stimulus, but Ludwig was grateful for it — it allowed him to think without distraction.

A distraction. he thought absently. Maybe he really did need a distraction right then. Preferably a loud one, with an obnoxious laugh, and a sweet smile, auburn hair-

Ludwig viciously shook his head, realizing where his thoughts were leading him. Instead of allowing his mind wander unnecessarily, he pulled out his phone.

To: Feliciano

Are you ok?

He gripped the device tightly in his hand, wanting to shoot off about a million different texts demanding to know what was wrong, but he was unable to bring himself to say more. He shut off the phone and shoved it into his pocket before saying something he'd regret.

Ludwig glared at the sidewalk beneath him, too engrossed in his own thoughts to realize that he'd made it back to his apartment. He sighed, climbing up the stairs as he mentally steeled himself for the unavoidable nuisance that was laying in wait for him. Ludwig unlocked his apartment door, trying to sneak in as silently as possible so he wouldn't run into-

"*Überraschung!*" screeched a shrill voice.

A projectile suddenly sailed past Ludwig's ear, slamming into the door behind him with a *crack.* He looked down, realizing with confusion that a pen had just been launched rather forcefully at him.

Ludwig looked up in surprise, though he really shouldn't be all that shocked anymore, "Gilbert? Why did you throw a pen at me?"

Shockingly scarlet eyes shone brightly as a grinning albino responded, "Gotta keep you on your toes *bruder.* Can't have you going soft on me."

Ludwig sighed in exasperation, having no clue what his brother was talking about. Instead of trying to dissect just what motivated Gilbert to act the way he did (an impossible feat, Ludwig had tried), he slipped off his shoes and made his way to the kitchen in the search of something to eat.

"And how was my awesome brother's day?" Gilbert asked from his position at the kitchen table, stacks of official-looking documents spread before him.

"Fine." was Ludwig's lackluster response.

Gilbert groaned, "*Fine?* C'mon, you gotta tell me more than that!"

With a shrug, Ludwig returned to digging through their cabinets. He didn't really have much more to offer, and distantly he thought he could hear Gilbert grumble about how *unawesome* he was, but the comment was promptly ignored.

The apartment descended into a rare state of silence, and even if it couldn't last, Ludwig relished in the relative peace. He decided to snack on an apple, leaning against the counter as he bit into it. Ludwig chewed absentmindedly, still feeling impossibly worried as he pulled out his phone again. Feliciano had yet to text him back, and the blond scowled at the device — almost like he blamed it for the lack of response.

"Oooh, I know that look. You're expecting a text from someone!" Gilbert shot out of his chair, trying to get a look at the phone screen over his brother's shoulder. "Who is it? Tell me!"

"*Nein,* Gil get off!" Ludwig growled as he shouldered the irritating albino roughly off of him.

"C'mon, what are you trying to hide?" Gilbert whined.

"Nothing, I just don't want you reading over my shoulder when it's none of your business." Ludwig said sternly.

Gilbert pouted, although the expression was short lived when he seemed to realize something. He smirked, his face turning positively devious as he sauntered slowly away. Ludwig didn't trust him for an instant, waiting for him to make some kind of comment. He only grew more anxious as Gilbert just silently took his seat, leaning back in his chair until

the front of it left the ground. The albino crossed his arms over his chest as that horrible little smirk of his grew.

“Whatever you’re thinking, stop it.” Ludwig grumbled.

Gilbert simply shrugged, “What do you think I’m thinking of?”

“Nothing good, and I would prefer for you to just knock it off.” Ludwig huffed, trying to gain control of the situation.

“It’s a girl, isn’t it?” Gilbert asked bluntly. Ludwig sputtered, unable to put up a proper defense before his brother jumped in again, “Or a boy. You know, I always suspected-”

“Stop.” Ludwig put a hand up, face burning, “Just. Stop.”

Gilbert grinned, eyes crinkling in amusement, “So it is.” A cheeky grin overtook his face when Ludwig didn’t immediately jump in to contradict him, “Is it the one you’re always talking about? Y’know that, uh, Frederico… or, what’s his face?”

“Feliciano.” Ludwig sighed, resigned to the fact that he wasn’t going to escape this.

“*Ja,* him!” Gilbert nodded to himself. “I still want to meet him, you know. Anyone who is awesome enough to catch the eye of my brother is awesome enough to meet me!”

Ludwig shifted uncomfortably at the phrasing, “I invited him over, but he’s not answering his phone right now.” as he said those words, he looked back down at his phone. Feliciano’s demeanor that day was worrisome to say the least, his typically expressive face that positively shone with positivity (and sometimes anxiety) had been drained of all emotion. It was hollow. Dead.

“Aww, you look worried. What’s wrong? Trouble in paradise?” Gilbert prodded, eyebrows shooting up suggestively.

“It’s nothing like that!” Ludwig shouted, face burning at the insinuation.

Gilbert’s grating laughter filled the apartment, “I know, you’re just too easy to mess with! Seriously, lighten up a little.”

Ludwig sighed again, something he did far too often when he was around his brother. He began walking away, fed up with the albino’s obnoxious commentary, “Whatever, I’m going to my room.”

“Wait! I need my pen!” Gilbert yelled after him.

Then you shouldn’t have thrown it at me, dummkopf. Ludwig thought, simply pretending he couldn’t hear his brother as he closed the bedroom door behind him.

Ludwig shifted restlessly in his bed, completely unable to surrender his consciousness. Sleep eluded him, and he thought he knew why. He reached over and turned his phone on, noting it

was nearly two in the morning. There were no new notifications.

Groaning loudly in annoyance, Ludwig turned off the device and glared angrily up at the ceiling. He wanted to shoot off another text, but Feliciano had told him that he'd lost his phone privileges at night.

That's partly my fault, I guess.

With a fond roll of his eyes, Ludwig thought back to their late-night conversations. They never really talked about anything important, and to be honest it was Feliciano who had done most (almost all) of the texting.

Ludwig knew that he should have cut those conversations short, but he simply couldn't bring himself to cut the talkative teen off. He thought that Feliciano had some sort of anxiety disorder — although that was strictly speculation on his end. At the very least, he was sensitive and had admitted multiple times that he thought he was annoying and talked too much.

Well, he does talk a lot.

While that may be true, Ludwig didn't find it overly irritating — especially compared to his own brother. But Feliciano clearly lacked confidence, and Ludwig thought that if he cut his (sometimes nonsensical) rambling off, then it would just reaffirm the notion that he was annoying in his head.

With a weary sigh, Ludwig prepared to launch into yet another attempt to fall asleep. But just as he was about to roll over, a notification lit up his phone screen. He nearly jumped in surprise, gripping the phone as he squinted at the new message.

From: Feliciano

Sorry. I'm ok.

Something cold crawled under his skin as he stared blankly at the message, the distinct feeling that something was wrong sitting heavily in his chest.

To: Feliciano

What happened?

Ludwig knew he was being blunt, but he had no problem digging to the root of the problem when the situation warranted it. He waited anxiously for the response, although it took a few minutes.

From: Feliciano

Just family stuff.

Well, that wasn't very forthcoming. Ludwig scowled at the phone, feeling the beginnings of frustration overtake some of the worry. He didn't really know anything about Feliciano's

family, although the way the teen spoke of them indicated that he positively adored them. Ludwig thought it was possible that he got into a fight with his brother, but that didn't really explain the look on his face from earlier.

To: Feliciano

Do you want to talk about it?

Ludwig stared at his phone for a long time after his text was sent, no response coming through for minutes afterwards. He wondered if he had pushed too far when he finally got a reply.

From: Feliciano

I dont know… i think im tired

Ludwig was confused by that. *What do you mean you 'think' you're tired?*

To: Feliciano

Tired?

From: Feliciano

Yeah… why are you up so late?

The abrupt change of topic didn't escape Ludwig's notice, but he recognized that Feliciano wasn't about to share what really happened. With a sigh of resignation, the blond went along with the new line of dialog.

To: Feliciano

Couldn't sleep. What about you? I thought you had to give up your phone at night?

From: Feliciano

I fell asleep on the couch and i think toni just forgot to take it tonight

To: Feliciano

How did you manage to fall asleep on the couch?

In all honesty, Ludwig wasn't really all that shocked — *I mean if he can fall asleep sitting up in class, is it really that surprising?*

From: Feliciano

Do you really need to ask?

Ludwig snorted a little at that. Even though the texts were shorter than normal and they were missing the typical emoji every five words, it was obvious that Feliciano was putting in an

effort to sound somewhat normal. There was still something decidedly off about it, but Ludwig decided to humor him.

To: Feliciano

Ah, that's right. I had totally forgotten about your narcoleptic tendencies.

From: Feliciano

Mean >:(you know my brother said the exact same thing a couple weeks ago…

To: Feliciano

So he is aware, good. I would hate to have to break the news.

Ludwig waited for another text, but he didn't receive a response to that. He was about to put his phone back on his nightstand, thinking that Feliciano must have fallen asleep, when his phone lit up.

From: Feliciano

Thank you

Ludwig stared blankly at the message, not exactly sure how he was supposed to respond. He tried to think if he'd done anything to deserve the gratitude, his mind coming up blank.

To: Feliciano

For what?

From: Feliciano

For everything. Goodnight Ludwig.

The vague response only added to his confusion, but Ludwig wished him a good night as he finally turned his phone off. The sadness that tinged each text was extremely uncharacteristic for the hyperactive Italian. Feliciano had, for better or for worse, wormed his way into Ludwig's life, and he took that seriously. They hadn't known each other but for a few weeks, but it felt like longer.

Gott, talk about cliché. He thought with a groan, but he couldn't keep the smile off his face. With a mental sigh he comforted himself with the fact that at least it wasn't as bad as 'love at first sight' — *As if that ever happens.*

Ludwig rolled over, his body finally allowing himself to drift asleep. He resolved to keep a closer eye on Feliciano. He thought that if somebody had said something to put that look on the fidgety teen's face, then there'd be hell to pay.

That night Ludwig slept fitfully, dreaming of all the ways he could exact his revenge on the person who had dared to kill Feliciano's spirit.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, I'm posting a chapter and it's not past midnight?

Op, anyway thanks for reading this chapter! Finally, Gilbert makes an appearance! I have been like so excited to introduce him because, I mean, how can you NOT love him?

So it was suggested that I provide some translations so here it goes:

Ja: yes
Nein: no
Überraschung: surprise
Bruder: brother
Dummkopf: fool/idiot/dummy
Gott: God

If I missed any, let me know! I'm pretty confident in my German, as I grew up in a largely German-speaking household. However, my Italian is straight trash, so ya know. I'm trying to keep it to a minimum, since I don't want to bog anything down with words that most people probably can't even pronounce lol.

Ok, long author's note so I guess I'll shut up now. I appreciate y'all so much!

'Till next time!

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After Feliciano's full-scale breakdown the previous night, it had taken little convincing on his end to persuade his brother to let him skip school. He had woken up with a fierce headache, that lingering sense of overbearing anxiety making the mere thought of interacting with his classmates enough to make his breath catch in his throat.

Antonio had already left for work, and Lovino had fallen back asleep hours ago. Feliciano was left to his own devices, spending the majority of the morning playing games on his phone or flipping through the few channels they got on their television. It was mind-numbingly boring, but it was preferable to facing the outside world.

Feliciano couldn't bring himself to eat lunch, nausea being a close companion to his now abating headache. He knew that in the past he'd been known for his rather voracious appetite — even as a child, he was always hungry. But the bare cabinets and empty fridge had forced him to adapt, and he found himself eating less and less in an attempt to conserve what little they had. Of course, if his brother or Antonio ever figured this out, Feliciano had no doubt that they'd throw a fit.

It's not like I'm doing anything wrong, but I just know that Lovi would blow it way out of proportion.

Nodding to himself at his own logic, Feliciano curled up on the couch until his brother rolled out of bed around one-thirty. Lovino yawned tiredly as he shuffled into the kitchen, offering a short greeting when he saw Feliciano join him at the kitchen table:

"Morning." he breathed, rubbing groggily at his eyes.

"Lovi, you missed morning-"

"-by hours. Yeah, I know." Lovino huffed, beginning to fiddle with the coffee pot. He yawned again, though he still managed a vaguely concerned look as he asked, "How are you feeling?"

Feliciano turned his thoughts inward, realizing that he really did feel much better. His time at home allowed him to forget about his responsibilities and obligations for a while, the little apartment becoming the only thing to exist for a few precious hours. He smiled genuinely, turning to face his brother, "Better. My head still hurts a little, but I'm not as tired anymore."

Lovino nodded, "Good. Have you eaten lunch yet?"

"Yeah, I ate a little bit ago." The lie rolled off Feliciano's tongue, smooth as silk.

Lovino grunted in response, pouring his cup of coffee as he sat heavily down at the table. Feliciano noticed how twitchy his brother acted, and he suspected that it had nothing to do

with the obscene amount of caffeine he consumed. His brother didn't work the previous night, so odds were that he wasn't up too late — *Well, late relative to Lovino. His sleep schedule is all kinds of messed up.*

Worry nibbled at his insides, and Feliciano was about to ask if he was alright when the shrill screech of a ringtone sliced through the easy atmosphere. Lovino jumped, spilling some of his coffee in the process. He dug his phone out of his pocket, peering nervously at the screen. A sudden scowl marred his expression as he hung up on the number, shoving his phone violently back into his pocket.

That worry he'd been feeling only grew, and Feliciano tried once more to get answers, "Who was that, Lovi?"

"Nobody. Probably a wrong number." was the immediate response as he aggressively cleaned up the coffee he'd spilled.

Feliciano nodded dumbly, not believing his brother in the slightest. But he really wasn't about to bring up that old argument again, thinking there was a better way to get answers — *maybe I could listen in on one of his calls…* Feliciano's thoughts trailed off, realizing with some guilt that he was making it a habit of eavesdropping lately.

Jumping when he himself got a notification, Feliciano pulled out his phone to see who it was:

From: Ludwig

Would you like to come over Thursday night?

Realizing that this was the perfect opportunity to get permission from his brother, Feliciano pushed on a hopeful smile as he asked, "Hey, Lovi?"

"What?" Lovino asked harshly, probably still irritated from the phone call.

Feliciano ignored the biting tone he'd been met with, "Can I go over to my friend's house this Thursday?"

Lovino looked up at that, "You won't be walking by yourself, will you?"

"No, I'll be with Ludwig the whole time!" Feliciano said excitedly.

"Is he the one you've been at the library with?" Lovino asked slowly.

"Yeah! It's actually the same project, and he said that he talked about me to his brother and that he wanted to meet me. So really, this was the perfect opportunity and I thought it might be nice to meet some new people!" Feliciano finished happily, not realizing how quickly he was speaking.

"So he wants you to meet his family already?" Lovino grumbled, almost to himself.

"I mean, yeah?"

“And you’re just friends?”

Feliciano had no idea what his brother was getting at, “Yes?”

“Hmph, is he aware of that?” Lovino huffed, crossing his arms.

“Lovi, what are you talking about?” Feliciano asked, truly confused.

Lovino pointed a finger at Feliciano accusingly, “Well you seem to be around him a lot, and don’t think that I haven’t noticed how often you’re on your phone. And ‘Ludwig’ sounds awfully German…” he trailed off.

“Okay, I’m lost.” Feliciano sighed, eyes scrunching as he tried to decipher what his brother was saying.

“You can go over, but I’d like to meet this punk some time.” Lovino growled, fire in his eyes.

Feliciano nodded by way of response, not about to push the issue when he’d gotten the answer that he wanted. He thought he could hear Lovino muttering about *damn potato bastards,* but he once again let it go.

A couple hours later and Lovino was getting ready for work. He emerged from his room wearing dark jeans and a simple grey button-up with the sleeves rolled up. Feliciano knew that his brother’s job was pretty casual, the bar he worked at not exactly high-end, but it wasn’t a total dive either.

“I’ve got to go, Toni should be home in a little bit. If you need anything, call me.” Lovino grumbled shortly. He hated his job, and Feliciano knew it. Hell, they all knew it. Lovino wasn’t cut out to work in the service industry, his temperament was far too volatile and he had a general unwillingness to put up with idiocy. Or rowdy drunks. Or people in general.

“Okay, I will. Have a good night!” Feliciano said brightly, bounding forward to hug his brother.

Lovino patted his back, “Yeah, I won’t. But thanks.” And with those short words, he breezed out of the little apartment.

Feliciano was left to his own devices, a creeping sense of fatigue sneaking into his overwrought mind. He was still drained after his breakdown last night, so he made the decision to take a short nap.

He made his way to the couch, throwing himself on top of the cushions as he breathed deeply in relief. The apartment was silent, almost eerily so. Feliciano was beginning to grow uncomfortable with no ambient sounds of somebody fiddling with something in the kitchen, or his brother’s characteristic grumbling.

I think I know why Antonio gets lonely on his own.

Pushing aside the discomfort of being utterly alone in a place that was usually a flurry of activity, Feliciano settled down and tried to drift off. But right before he allowed himself to

turn off, he thought back to the short conversation he had with Lovino — what had he meant by all those questions?

Is it really so weird that Ludwig wants me to meet his brother? Feliciano couldn't make heads nor tails of it.

If he wasn't mistaken, then his brother had been acting way overprotective of him. Not that that was inherently strange — growing up hadn't exactly been easy, and they had clung to each other from the beginning. Even after they moved in with Roma, and were no longer in immediate danger, Lovino (and Antonio too, for that matter) had stepped in as his guardians. Ironically enough, that term became quite literal after the death of his grandfather.

But Ludwig's not a threat. Lovi had no reason to get so defensive. Feliciano thought in confusion. It was true that he talked to Ludwig a lot, and that they texted quite frequently. Feliciano even mentioned him from time to time, but he was just a friend. Even if Lovino was suspicious and untrusting of people, it didn't explain the interrogation from earlier.

Who knows. I doubt even Toni knows the ways Lovi's mind works.

Feliciano mentally shrugged, deciding it wasn't important enough to agonize over. Antonio was bound to be back in a little less than a half hour — the perfect amount of time for a *siesta* he decided. Feliciano curled up on the couch, finally shutting off his brain for a much-needed nap.

A slamming door is what pried Feliciano away from the unconscious bliss of sleep, the teen peeling his eyes open to see a cheerful Antonio waltz in. He was whistling a bright little tune to himself, eyes drifting absentmindedly around the apartment.

Suddenly their eyes met, and Antonio's expression instantly turned apologetic, "Ah, Feli! Sorry, I didn't know you were sleeping out here."

"That's alright," Feliciano mumbled, bringing his arms up in a languid stretch, "I actually need to ask you a favor, so I'm glad you woke me up."

With a curious smile, Antonio asked, "What do you need?"

"Well, I was going to turn in this application the other day, but then…" Feliciano trailed off, not sure how to finish.

"Yesterday happened. *Sí,* I understand." Antonio finished lightly.

Feliciano smiled gratefully, "Yeah, so I was wondering if you could walk down with me tonight?"

"Sure! Just let me change and we can go in a few minutes." Antonio called over his shoulder as he disappeared into his bedroom. Feliciano simply stared before he realized that he should probably get ready as well.

The two were out the door and walking down the street in record time. They ambled at a relaxed pace in companionable silence, simply enjoying the beautiful day. Autumn was beginning to roll in, but the chill had yet to truly invade the warm air around them — like change just on the horizon, remaining just out of reach.

It seemed like in no time that they had made it to the library, Feliciano leading them inside. He did his best to ignore the bustle of the first floor, his shoulders scrunching up in defense against the overbearing noise.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one to notice the clamor, "Woah, are you sure this is a library? It's so loud!" Antonio asked in astonishment.

"The second floor is much quieter. This is where people can talk and hang out." Feliciano breathed, making a beeline for the stairwell.

As usual, the upper level was much calmer, and Feliciano felt a sigh of relief work its way past his lips. Antonio seemed shocked by the sudden change in atmosphere, his eyes scanning every corner of the room they could spot.

"Hey, look!" he exclaimed, pointing at a row of folders and loose paper. He picked up one of the thin books there and opened it, "It's music. I didn't know you could check out music at a library…"

"That's because I worked very hard to get it here, and I would prefer you to not shuffle everything around." huffed an unfamiliar voice. Suddenly, a stuffy-looking man appeared, scowl fixed firmly in place. He had dark hair and a rather prominent cowlick, his glare so fierce it could rival Lovino's. He stared pointedly down at the music book that Antonio was flipping through, causing the Spaniard to return it to its designated spot.

"Sorry, I just used to play guitar. I saw the music and I guess I got excited." Antonio mumbled sheepishly.

The man sighed and relented when Antonio pulled a stunningly accurate impression of a kicked-puppy, "I have a few guitar books over here, just *please* don't leave anything out of order."

Antonio perked up at that, looking to the direction that the man had indicated. After he was thoroughly distracted, the man turned to Feliciano, "And are you looking for music too?"

Feliciano shook his head, "No, I'm just turning in this application."

"Application?" the man asked, instantly straightening to his full height, "My name is Roderich, and I manage this floor. Would you mind if I take a look?" he asked, motioning for the teen to hand over the stack of papers in his hand.

Feliciano gave it to him, waiting nervously as he watched Roderich flip critically through the pages. Finally, the man looked back up and said, "I don't usually do this, but we are in desperate need of help. Do you think you can come in Friday evening?"

“Really?” Feliciano asked in shock, but he quickly corrected himself, “I mean, yes!”

“Good. I’ll need you to fill out some paperwork when you get here, so please bring some sort of identification. Your phone number is listed here, correct?” Roderich asked, gesturing to the application. At Feliciano’s nodding head he said, “Then I will be in contact with you.”

Feliciano nearly jumped when a hand invaded his personal space, and it was a shy smile that he reached his own hand out to shake it. Roderich breezed away shortly thereafter, shooting a critical eye towards a pile of books that were stacked haphazardly on a desk.

Even if his heart still pounded uncomfortably in his chest, Feliciano could feel a smile work its way onto his face.

That was so much easier than I thought. I can’t wait to tell Lovi!

Antonio was still flipping through various books and sheets of music, although he looked up when he heard Feliciano approach him. He smiled at the excited look on the teen’s face, asking brightly, “So, how’d it go?”

“He asked if I could come in this Friday!” Feliciano replied in excitement.

“Really? That’s awesome! They didn’t even ask for an interview, I guess they really liked you then, huh?” Antonio smirked, elbowing Feliciano lightly in the side.

“Something like that. Really, I think they’re just understaffed.” Feliciano said logically, smile still pronounced as ever.

Antonio shrugged, “Either way, the result is the same.” He messed with some of the music in his hands before placing it carefully back on the shelf. “Are you ready to go back home?”

“Yup!” Feliciano sang, already turning on his heel.

They walked through the hub of activity on the first floor, although Feliciano was far too excited to really notice the oppressive atmosphere around him. Even so, it was with a great sense of relief that he stepped foot outside. Feliciano looked upwards, noticing with a vague sense of worry that the sky was darkening as imposing clouds started rolling in. He had his eyes trained on the ominous sky above even as he asked, “Did you see any music you liked?”

Antonio hummed in thought, bringing a finger up to his chin, “Hmm, not really. I don’t usually read sheet music.”

“Really?” Feliciano asked curiously, bringing his eyes back down.

With a bright smile, Antonio explained, “I learned how to play on my own without reading music. I only learned how to read it afterwards.”

Feliciano nodded in response, remembering his childhood and how Antonio had always been singing and playing just about anything his heart desired. He and his brother had met Antonio while they were still living in Italy, and after a rocky start, Lovino had grown close to him.

Feliciano smiled at the memories, although it was tinged with a wistful sense of longing, “Toni, why don’t you play anymore?”

Antonio sighed sadly, casting his eyes down towards the sidewalk, “I would love to play again, but I had to sell my guitar a few years ago. Some things are more important than personal possessions, anyway.”

“Oh.” Feliciano peered back up at the sky, noticing with some trepidation that it was growing increasingly dark. A storm was going to hit, and from the looks of things, it was going to be a particularly nasty one.

“This is my favorite part.” Antonio whispered, breathing in deeply and holding his breath.

Feliciano looked at him curiously, “What do you mean?”

Antonio exhaled with a smile, “It’s the calm before the storm.”

Feliciano nodded, finally understanding. He tried to absorb the still atmosphere, knowing that in just a short amount of time a furious storm would be unleashed. He thought shortly of Lovino, hoping that he wouldn’t be caught trudging through the thick of it.

Lovino’s strong, I know that he’ll make it. Feliciano thought to himself, praying for his safe passage as the storm came rolling in.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all! Sorry for not updating in a hot sec, but I was moving and didn't have wifi for a bit there. But I'm back so woo!

Anyways, the pace of the story is going to be picking up a bit, so hold on tight! I'm super excited to get things going like you have no clue.

I appreciate each and every one of y'all for leaving a kudos, commenting, or heck even just reading this. Y'all make my chest feel so warm, this was such a self-indulgent thing and I never expected people to enjoy it to the extent that they are. Bless all of you, for real.

'Till next time!

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino stood behind a tall counter with a rag in hand, harshly wiping down the surface as his scowl deepened. He could hear the rain outside brutalising the roof overhead, the thought of trudging through the worsening storm only adding to his annoyance.

It had been a slow night at the bar due to the inclement weather, but the patrons that they did have were the usual breed of noisy, *irritating* drunkards. He remembered a new customer who had hardly shut his mouth the entirety of the night, constantly boasting about out *awesome* he was. Lovino nearly growled at the memory.

“Stop it! Your face will freeze with that awful look if you keep scowling like that, you know.” trilled a bright voice.

Lovino suddenly recoiled when a rag was thrown at his face, and he whipped around with an even fiercer look, “What the hell, Elizabeta? And good, I fucking hope it does freeze like this!” he yelled, launching the rag right back at her.

Elizabeta caught the rag with an amused little laugh, her expression turning devious as she smirked at the irate Italian, “But that scowl just ages you so! I’m sure you’d look years younger if you just smiled a little more.”

That’s the point, you hag. Lovino growled in his head. Not even his coworkers knew his real age, and he intended to keep it that way. He’d been hired under the pretense that he was twenty-two years old, and nobody had thought twice about it. If the owner of the bar ever found out that he was lying, he could be facing legal action — something that he could absolutely *not* afford.

With an irritated sigh, Lovino continued to clean up for the night. He looked up at the clock, finding that it was nearing two in the morning already.

Damn, late night.

On a typical night, Lovino would be finished by now, but the staff had some extra cleaning due to customers tracking in water from outside. At the thought, he peered out the window and wondered if he should wait the storm out, or just suck it up and wade through the downpour.

Deciding he needed a second opinion, Lovino turned back towards his mischievous coworker and asked, “Hey, when’s this storm supposed to let up?”

Elizabeta put a finger up to her chin, “Hmm, I’m not sure. But probably not for a while yet.”

“Great.” Lovino huffed, glaring out the window.

“I would call a cab if I were you. I don’t think it’s a good idea to walk through this on your own.” Elizabeta advised as she started flipping the stools onto the countertop.

“*Pfft,* don’t tell me what to do.” Lovino mumbled, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Elizabeta giggled — *fucking giggled, the stupid hag* — at Lovino’s childish actions.

It was in short time thereafter that Lovino finished cleaning. He threw on his jacket he punched out, sighing when he noticed the cruel rain wasn’t letting up at all, “I’m out of here, see you tomorrow.”

“Be safe, it’s pretty bad out there.” Elizabeta cautioned, but waved him goodbye nonetheless.

“Yeah, yeah.” Lovino grumbled, pushing the door open and into the turbulent weather outside.

The rain was relentless, the water pooling dangerously on the sidewalk as the wind whipped all around. The streetlights were obscured by the torrential downpour, the faint rumbling of thunder an ominous backdrop to an already chaotic scene. Briefly, Lovino thought he should have called a cab after all, but it was useless to linger on the thought now. Instead he shoved his hands deep into his pockets as he put his head down.

Damn, this is some bullshit weather. Lovino thought when he felt his feet sloshing in his already soaked shoes. He watched a car speed by, kicking up more water as he walked.

“Asshole!” he screamed after the vehicle, grumbling as he was forced to keep trudging forward. Lovino heard another car approaching him from behind, so he moved further away from the roadside in an attempt to avoid the inevitable splash of water. But the car didn’t go speeding by, it actually seemed to be… slowing down?

What the hell?

Lovino walked slower, waiting to see if the car would continue on past him. When the car just decelerated to match his pace, he sped up, but he car matched his speed once again.

It’s following me.

A touch of trepidation began pecking at his insides, so it was with little thought that Lovino shot down the alleyway to his immediate right. He emerged on the other side and began jogging, wading through the deepening puddles for several tense minutes. It was getting harder to see, the rain coming down in sheets, so he slowed down to a brisk walk.

I think I lost them.

The thought brought him relief, but there was a lingering sense of anxiety that still held him hostage. He couldn’t even begin to fathom why somebody would be following him. The rain smacked into the concrete, the sharp sound only adding to his paranoia. The vacant streets surrounding him were haunting, the streetlights casting disjointed shadows onto the cold

pavement below. If it weren't for the fact that Lovino was accustomed to walking home alone so late at night, then we was sure those dancing shadows would be enough to drive him mad.

Lovino trudged for a while longer, a shiver ripping through his frame as he was soaked through by the rain. His journey home was not a short one, and once again he felt a fleeting sense of regret about not calling a cab. But the longer he walked in peace, the more he was inclined to believe that he'd just been imagining things.

They probably weren't even trailing me. I'm just being paranoid…

But the tell-tale rumble of an approaching car blasted that thought to the wayside, the vehicle ambling up next to him to match his pace.

"Oh, hell no!" Lovino growled, propelling his body forward to dip into another alleyway.

He weaved in and out of hidden walkways and dark alleys, desperate to evade the car that pursued him. But every single time he thought he lost the accursed vehicle, he would hear the familiar hum of an engine tail his every move.

Lovino wasn't even sure where he was anymore, the constant weaving and running having completely disoriented him. The rain still beat down mercilessly, doing nothing to aid in his escape as he ducked down another alleyway.

What the fuck do they even want from me?

He was growing desperate, panic making the edge of his vision fuzzy. Not only was he being followed by some unknown *creep,* but he was also completely, hopelessly lost.

Lovino turned one last corner and shoved his back against the brick wall. His breathing was so rapid he was afraid of blacking out, and he was shaking from both the adrenaline and frigid temperature. He contemplated his next move, digging his phone out of his pocket. He couldn't keep playing this game with the car, and he was terrified to find out what would happen if he was caught.

Antonio. Lovino thought, shakily punching in his number into the phone. He brought it up to his ear, praying that his airheaded boyfriend had left his phone volume up. Lovino had no clue how he expected Antonio to help, but the distant sound of the car shooting by made him realize that *anything* was better than waiting.

"C'mon, bastard. Pick up…" Lovino whispered as he started chewing on his nails.

Finally an answer, "Hello?"

Lovino sighed loudly in relief, "Toni! I need help."

"Lovi? Are you alright?" Antonio asked, a tinge of concern coloring his voice.

"I-I don't know. I'm being followed and I have no idea where the fuck I am right now." Lovino rushed out, thinking his heart might beat right out of his chest when he realized that the car was most definitely driving back and forth along the road.

“Followed? By who?” Something rustled on the other end of the line, indicating that Antonio was scrambling to get out of bed.

“I don’t know!” Lovino nearly screeched, his nerves completely frayed. “There’s this car that won’t leave me alone, and i’m hiding in an alley right now, and I have *no fucking clue where I am!*”

“Okay, just calm down. Panicking will just make it worse.” Antonio tried to reason.

“I’m not panicking!” Lovino did screech this time, his breathing ragged.

“Okay, good. You’re doing good.” Antonio breathed, sounding vaguely panicked himself. “Can you tell me any landmarks around you?”

Lovino peered around the corner and squinted through the rain, “There’s a convenience store across the street, and some brick buildings, and… Dammit, I don’t know!” he cried, beginning to hyperventilate. “Everything looks the same as the rest of the city, I just don’t know!”

The sound of laboured breathing sounded over the phone, almost like Antonio was running as he huffed, “Can you see what street you’re on?”

Squinting through the rain once again, Lovino desperately tried to make out the lettering when he spotted what looked like a street sign. The car that had been haunting him for the better part of an hour rushed by again, like it was toying with him. He tried to ignore his panic as he finally made out what street he was on, “I-I think it says Magnolia.”

“Magnolia? Okay, I think I know where that is.” Antonio grit out, still breathing hard. “Hold on, I’ll be there soon.”

Lovino nodded, eyes squeezed tight. He pressed his back further into the rough wall, each second feeling like an eternity. Every once in a while, Antonio would check in with him and try to talk him down from his state of panic. At some point Lovino noticed that he couldn't hear the car driving back and forth anymore.

It’s gone.

He wasn’t sure if that made him more or less terrified.

“Lovino! Hey, where are you?” somebody shouted, voice muffled by the rain.

“I’m over here!” Lovino called, not able to tear himself away from where he was frozen against the wall. The sounds of splashing footsteps were his only warning before a face silhouetted by the streetlights materialized in front of him.

“Lovi!” A pair of hands cupped his face, “Are you alright?”

By way of response, Lovino placed his own hands over Antonio’s. He could almost cry in relief, but he resolutely held his tears at bay as he grit out, “You couldn’t remember to bring an umbrella, bastard?”

Antonio looked at him seriously, refusing to take the bait, “Lovi, look at me.” he gently shook Lovino’s shoulders until their eyes finally met, “What’s going on?”

Lovino’s breath caught in his throat as he was forced to endure that impossibly worried gaze. He was still on edge, and even if he knew the answer, he still felt compelled to ask, “Is the car gone?”

“I didn’t see any car.” Antonio replied, looking over his shoulder to confirm the statement.

Lovino slumped over in relief. He pulled Antonio’s hands away from his face, but kept one of them gripped tightly in his own. “Can we go home?”

Antonio nodded slowly, a million questions flashing through his eyes at once. Lovino was grateful when none of those questions were voiced, and he allowed himself to be led by hand through the desolate city streets.

As it turned out, Lovino managed to get pretty close to their apartment before he called Antonio. They approached the building, Lovino visibly relaxing when they rushed in. It was instantly warmer, both of them finally escaping the brutal rain.

They trudged tiredly up the stairs, their hands only dropping when they were safely tucked away in their apartment. Lovino was still violently shivering, and he hugged his arms tightly around his middle in an attempt to retain his diminishing body heat.

Antonio looked at him worriedly, bringing a hand up to his boyfriend’s icy cheek, “How long were you out there?”

Lovino leaned into the touch, letting his eyes drift shut as he relished the warmth the hand provided, “What time is it?”

Antonio glanced at the clock, “Almost three-fifteen.”

“About an hour then.” Lovino breathed. The stress of the night paired with the fact that he'd worked overtime causing him to sway dangerously on his feet. He was shivering, but he didn’t feel cold. A numbness was beginning to permeate his senses as Lovino once again slumped over.

“We need to get you out of those clothes.” Antonio said decisively, moving his hand from Lovino’s cheek to his shoulder in order to guide him towards their bedroom.

“Feliciano?” Lovino asked.

“Still asleep. I left a note for him earlier, but it hasn’t been touched. Now,” Antonio began tugging on Lovino’s shirt, “let’s get you into something warmer.”

Lovino let himself be stripped as a baggy pair of sweatpants and hoodie enveloped his frame. Antonio left for a few seconds before returning with a towel, promptly dropping it on Lovino’s head as he started peeling off his own soaked clothing.

His hair was still dripping water onto his shoulders, so it was with shaky hands that Lovino started drying it off. The bedroom lapsed into a tense silence, each party lost in their own thoughts.

Who in the hell would be following me?

He couldn't rationalize what had happened, his exhausted mind refusing to come to terms with the dramatic events of the night.

"Lovi?"

Lovino jumped, head whipping up in shock. Antonio had taken the towel out of his hands without him even noticing, his brain shutting down as quickly as his exhausted body as he grunted out an ineloquent, "Huh?"

"What happened tonight?" Antonio asked softly.

Lovino sighed, knowing that he was going to have to explain himself. The only problem with that was he was just as confused as Antonio was. "I don't know. Some asshole apparently thought it was funny to follow me." he characterised the statement with a dismissive shrug.

Antonio looked perplexed, obviously not satisfied with the answer. In all honesty, Lovino wasn't either.

"You said you were there for an hour?" he probed.

"Yeah, I noticed the car about five minutes into my walk." Lovino huffed.

"And you're sure that it was following you?" Antonio asked, his eyebrows furrowing.

Lovino nodded — he was sure that it was following him

Actually, I would say chasing me is more accurate.

With a heavy sigh, Antonio stepped back to rub at his temples. He looked up to see Lovino still swaying where he stood. His face was emotionless, the stress of the evening sending him into a state of cool apathy. Antonio knew that he would process everything that had happened, and he thought that it would be in his best interest to get Lovino to sleep before that apathetic demeanor morphed into something more explosive.

Antonio began ushering his exhausted boyfriend into their bed, "Okay, we'll talk about it tomorrow. How about we go to bed?"

Lovino nodded absentmindedly, crawling under the covers the minute he was pushed onto the bed. He stared straight ahead, letting the events of the night catch up to him. Just as Antonio feared, that mask of apathy was slowly starting to melt away, transforming into one of rage.

Antonio sighed.

Why in the living hell would somebody follow me? Dio, I know that I piss people off, but not that much! I'll find them. I swear to God I'll kill them… Lovino internally seethed.

"You're thinking too hard Lovi. Please, let's go to sleep." Antonio groaned, his voice completely resigned. He anticipated what came next.

"I don't think that I'm thinking enough. Christ, Antonio, somebody was fucking following me! What in the hell did they want? I swear if they try that bullshit again then-"

"You'll kill them?" Antonio finished sharply for him, "Because no offense Lovi, but if they wanted to hurt you, then they would have."

Lovino met his gaze head on, even more furious at the insinuation, "You don't think I could've taken them?"

"Honestly? No." Antonio crossed his arms, "I don't."

Lovino ground his teeth together and glared before gritting out, "And why the hell not?"

Antonio glared right back, "Because I know you, Lovino. For all your talk, you're horrible with confrontation."

"What in the hell are you talking about?" Lovino shouted, throwing his arms up indignantly, "All I do is piss people off and argue! Jesus, are you sure you know me at all?"

"I know you better than anybody. And like I said, you talk big, but I saw how scared you looked tonight. You freeze up as soon as it gets violent, Lovi." Antonio shot back, sounding more uneasy than before.

Lovino, however, couldn't hear the blatant concern directed at him, "Bullshit. I can fight back just fine! And I have, in case you forgot. Do you really think I'm that weak?"

"That was different, you were protecting Feli." Antonio ran a hand through his hair in frustration.

"How was it different? I didn't freeze up then, did I?" Lovino demanded.

"No, but I'm just afraid that-"

"That what? I'm a defenseless coward who can't stick up for himself?" Lovino ranted.

"That's not what I said. I'm just saying-"

"I can stick up for myself just fine! I don't need anybody protecting me. Just let somebody try something, I'll fuck them up!"

Antonio grabbed both of Lovino's shoulders and jerked him forward until their noses were barely touching, "Shut the hell up and listen to me!"

With a little squeak of surprise, Lovino tried to pull away. But he was held in place as he was forced to endure that piercing stare, waiting in shocked silence for the continuation.

Antonio's breathing was ragged, but he managed to to hiss with conviction, "I know you freeze up because I've seen it! *Dios mío* Lovi, I've seen you beaten. I've seen you so hurt you can't even move! The worst part is that *you would let it happen!*"

Lovino flinched at that, looking down in shame. He didn't have a response to that, but it seemed that Antonio was not yet finished:

"I don't think you're weak, Lovi. I could never think that of you. But I don't know what's going on, or why somebody would be chasing you through the city, and when I think of what could have happened tonight if you didn't call me…" Antonio trailed off, his grip on Lovino's shoulders falling away as he averted his eyes, whispering shortly, "It terrifies me."

Lovino whipped his head up, unsure if he should respond to that. The comment about how he'd frozen up in the past had stung, but what stung worse was the realization that his boyfriend was right. Lovino knew that he was provocative and had an unfortunate tendency to make threats, but those threats were always empty.

Antonio swiped at his eyes, completely spent after the outburst. He folded his hands in his lap as his shoulders fell in exhaustion. They sat in silence on the bed as the tension began to ebb out of the room.

Lovino, perhaps feeling just an inkling of guilt, snaked an arm around his boyfriend's shoulders and pulled him into his side. He refused to meet Antonio's wide eyes as he muttered, "Idiot."

After Antonio had called him out, Lovino realized that it wasn't anger that he was feeling, but fear. He knew that despite his fiery attitude, he struggled to fight back. His sharp tongue could cut like knives, but physical violence frightened him more than he was willing to admit.

Lovino knew that he was in control when he could speak, and he was confident in his ability to talk himself out of most situations. But the moment somebody raised a hand against him, he lost all control. He was helpless. Frozen.

With a sigh, Lovino realized that he should apologize. He leaned forward, resting his head against Antonio's beneath him as he mumbled, "I'm sorry."

Antonio jerked in surprise, but was held still by Lovino's grip around him. The apology hung heavily between them, but Antonio finally shifted until he was hugging Lovino around the waist before saying, "No, I'm sorry. You didn't *let* yourself be hurt, that was wrong of me to say."

"But you were right." Lovino breathed, absently playing with Antonio's hair as he whispered, "I couldn't defend me or Feli when we were kids, and if that fucker caught me then I might have frozen up tonight too."

Antonio hugged Lovino a little tighter at the words, “Well they didn’t catch you, if that’s what they were trying to do. You’re too clever for them, Lovi.”

“Clever?” Lovino snorted in amusement, “How in the fuck did you come to that conclusion?”

Antonio’s eyes drifted closed as he smiled, “Well for starters, you figured out that you were being followed, so you ran. Not a lot of people would have stayed so calm in that situation. Then you were able to evade them long enough to call me for help. Fighting isn’t always the answer, and you knew it.”

Lovino sighed, “I don’t think it was *cleverness* that saved me.”

“Maybe not entirely.” Antonio conceded. “But you’re forgetting one key quality about yourself.”

“And what would that be?” Lovino asked sarcastically.

Antonio laughed, “I’ll give you a hint: it’s one of the things that I love most about you, even though it can make me really mad sometimes.”

Lovino rolled his eyes, “My charming innocence?”

“I asked about you, not your brother.” Antonio pouted. “But no. It’s your stubbornness.”

“What?” Lovino deadpanned.

Antonio propped himself up on his elbows, “It’s true! No offense Lovi, but you can be a stubborn ass when you want to be.”

“You can’t just say ‘no offense’ and expect me not to take offense.” Lovino grumbled to himself.

Laughing lightly in amusement, Antonio looked Lovino directly in the eyes, “You’re stubborn, and I love that about you. You refuse to stay down, and even if it’s not physical, you fight every single day.”

Lovino’s mouth hung wide open, having exactly zero words to respond to that. The intense staring persisted, like Antonio was trying to convey his sincerity through his gaze alone. After a few more abandoned attempts to speak, Lovino was finally able to get out, “I think that’s the first time anyone’s ever seen my stubbornness as a good thing.

Antonio laughed loudly at that, flopping back down to rest his head on Lovino’s chest, “Well I do. It makes you, you. I love you, Lovino. You are the strongest, most caring person I have ever met. Everything about you is perfect, even your imperfections!” he sang brightly.

“Bastard, that doesn’t make any sense.” Lovino looked off to the side, face bright red.

“It doesn’t have to.” Antonio reached down and brought the blanket over his own shoulders.

Lovino also settled down, allowing himself to be used as a human pillow. He began running his hand through Antonio's hair once again, feeling the high emotions of the last hour draining. The effect of the sudden loss of energy was lulling them both asleep, the gentle thrum of the rain now comforting.

"I love you too." Lovino whispered quietly into the darkness.

Antonio hummed in response, burying his face even further into the younger's chest.

Questions swirled through Lovino's mind, and he was still unbelievably on-edge about what had happened. A part of him was hoping that it was some stupid prank, but he knew better. He was still threading his fingers through Antonio's hair, the action easing his anxious mind.

With the constant phone calls and now apparent stalking he was forced to endure, Lovino was positive that he was being targeted. He had a sneaking suspicion that sat untouched in the back of his head about who was responsible, but for the life of him he couldn't figure out what hte point of it all was.

Like Toni said, I'm a stubborn ass. Whatever happens, I can outlast it.

With those final thoughts, he gathered a now slumbering Antonio into a tight embrace and finally let sleep claim him for a few merciful hours.

Chapter End Notes

Welp, here goes another one. Goodness, I am not kind to Lovi in this. Hate to say it, but it gets worse before it gets better.

Anyways, thank you so much for reading! I am super exhausted, 'cause Christmas and stuff. Oh yeah, Merry Christmas to everyone who celebrates it! Hope it was a good one.

Only got one translation this time:

Dios Mio - My God

Also can I just say that Antonio may be my favorite character to write? I can't help but write him as a complete sweetheart, he's just too nice! I want to give him some more depth and development too. Jeez, this story is probably going to end up being at least novel length. Hope y'all are ready for that lol.

Once more, bless y'all for reading. What would you like to see more/less of? We are gonna get back into Feliciano's story next time, so get hype.

As always, 'till next time!

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano sat in art class Thursday afternoon looking down at his completed portrait. He was rather proud of how it turned out, even though the picture had been a catalyst for one of the more severe breakdowns that he'd had in a while.

He sighed as he brought a hand to run delicately over the paper, feeling content to see his Roma's smile again. Feliciano had poured himself into the portrait, trying to do his grandfather justice. That pang of loss still clawed at his chest, but was no longer such a potent pain.

The rest of the period Feliciano spent chatting mindlessly with Kiku until they had to turn their completed assignment to the front. Francis took Feliciano's and nodded, a little smile on his face. Hopefully that was a good thing.

The day was flying by far too quickly for Feliciano, the anxiety that crept in every time he remembered that he was going over to Ludwig's after school never letting up.

It's just Ludwig. There's no need to freak out!

But it wasn't just Ludwig, but his brother as well. Feliciano didn't know why the prospect of meeting the blond's brother made him so nervous, but he wanted to make a good impression. After all, this was Ludwig's family he was meeting.

Lovino seemed to make a big deal when I told him I was meeting his brother.

That was another thing that perplexed him. Feliciano recalled the strange questions his brother had asked him only a few days ago. Thankfully, Lovino hadn't thrown a fit like he feared he would this morning. Actually, he'd seemed rather subdued — apparently he'd woken up with a minor fever. Lovino explained that he'd been caught in the rain, but he adamantly refused to elaborate.

He's probably just being stubborn like usual. At least now he doesn't have the energy to interrogate me again. Feliciano thought with a touch of concern regarding his brother's current state of illness.

It was finally time for the last class of the day, and Feliciano bounced excitedly to the locker room in order to change. He emerged into the gymnasium, spotting Ludwig just a ways off. He practically skipped over to him, tapping him softly on the shoulder.

"Hi!" Feliciano smiled sweetly when the blond turned to face him.

"Good afternoon." was the stiff response.

Feliciano rocked back and forth on his feet, buzzing with nervous energy. The wait for class to get started was just a bit awkward, but both teens listened attentively when today's activity was announced: soccer.

Now bouncing up and down where he stood, Feliciano desperately tried to cover up the excited smile when he learned they'd be playing one of his favorite games.

"I take it you like football?" Ludwig asked in amusement.

"You could say that, *sì.*" Feliciano nodded with a little smirk. "It is the national sport of Italy, after all." he breathed, completely forgetting that it was perhaps the most popular sport in the world. But he had tunnel vision at the current moment, too engrossed in the sudden desire to *win.*

His demeanor completely altered around him, and Ludwig's eyes widened in surprise.

Feliciano had never been a very competitive person — that role belonged to his brother — but soccer was something he'd grown up with, something he knew he was good at. He may not be a confident person by nature, but this was an activity that he had no problem bragging about.

I hope we play outside. The gym floor hurts way more than the grass when you get hit…

They were soon herded outside, much to Feliciano's delight. Teams were chosen, and despite his best efforts to cling to Ludwig's side, the two were still split up.

Feliciano claimed a spot as a forward, surprisingly having a predisposition for offensive positions. He peered across the field and noticed with a thrill of competitiveness that Ludwig had settled back as a defender.

The coach read off some general rules — *no foul play, remember it's just a game, blah, blah, blah* — but nobody was really listening. A large group of students who didn't want to be involved played their own little game off to the side, leaving the most competitive students to take the field. Feliciano was pleased by the amount of obvious athletes who populated the field, bringing the promise of a good game.

The whistle blew, and the match was underway.

Feliciano flew forward, eyes only for the ball ahead. He evaded various defenders in an attempt to find an opening. He danced and weaved across the field, his small body working to his advantage as he was able to out-maneuver most of the defenders. He sidestepped one player and raised a hand up to call for the ball. It was passed his way, but right when he was about to receive it, a large body dashed in front of him and kicked the ball downfield.

"Sorry, but I think you forgot something."

With a defined little pout, Feliciano looked up to identify who had ruined his efforts. He had a glare at the ready, but the look turned to one of surprise when a familiar blond was smirking down at him:

“Soccer is the national sport of Germany, too.” Ludwig shrugged, a playful smirk painting his features.

Feliciano was quickly glaring once again, feeling that competitive spirit smolder in his chest. He watched as Ludwig jogged away, looking far too satisfied for his liking.

Oh, so it’s going to be that way?

Feliciano doubled his efforts, dazzling many of his teammates with elaborate footwork and a surprising amount of speed. But his attempts to score were thwarted by a certain blue-eyed defender — every. single. time.

“Ahh!” Feliciano screamed as the ball was once again kicked down to the other side of the field. He was ready to tear his own hair out for the frustration he was feeling.

Ludwig sauntered by him, chuckling lightly in amusement. His hips swayed off to one side before he brought them back, effectively checking Feliciano harshly in the side. The smaller almost went sprawling, but he caught himself before whipping around just in time to watch Ludwig amble slowly away — like nothing had happened.

Feliciano ground his teeth at the sight.

Both teams were panting heavily, neither able to gain the upperhand. The class period would be coming to an end soon, and Feliciano was by far his team’s best chance at success. He found himself with the ball more often than not, growing desperate to score *just one goal!*

This was his last chance to score. The pressure was immense, but for once Feliciano didn’t feel like he’d be crushed by it.

He eluded one defender, passing the ball to a teammate as he positioned himself in front of the goal. Ludwig stepped right behind him, making sure that there were no openings if the ball was passed back.

Feliciano did his best to break Ludwig’s defense, but he was finding it nearly impossible to maneuver away. The ball was being passed back whether he was open or not, and he had about a split second to think of a plan. Instead of the constant evasion tactics that he’d been (unsuccessfully) using, Feliciano realized that he was going to have to be a little more aggressive.

He received the ball, slamming his back against Ludwig in an attempt to box him out. The blond grunted in surprise, but he had a solid body and was able to stand firm. Feliciano continued to push back, deciding he was close enough to the goal before spinning away and dashing to the side.

“*Sheisse!*” Ludwig hissed as he scrambled to catch up.

Feliciano had a look of careful concentration on his face as he prepared to shoot. He lined up the shot, nodding once to himself before propelling the ball forward. But the moment his foot

made contact with the ball, a heavy body crashed into his side, sending him and his assailant to crash heavily to the grass below.

They hit the ground hard, but Feliciano was quick to roll over on his stomach just in time to watch the ball sail past the goalie and into the net. He flopped onto his back and pumped both fists into the air, “Yes, yes, yes!”

“Dammit.”

Feliciano turned to see who had so recklessly crashed into him, bringing a hand up to muffle his amused laughter when he saw Ludwig glaring up at the sky. He crawled over to the disgruntled blond and poked him in the face with an evil little smirk, “What was the national sport of Germany again?”

Ludwig sighed as his view of the sky was obscured by a gloating Italian. The glare soon melted into a small smile, although he was still obviously miffed at the loss, “Yeah, yeah, don’t be a sore winner.”

Feliciano threw his head back in laughter, hauling himself up to stand. He offered a hand to Ludwig, smiling when it was accepted with little complaint. Feliciano opened his mouth to speak when he was tackled once again as his teammates showered him with praise for the goal. Although he didn’t go sprawling to the ground, the amount of attention he was surrounded with left him breathless.

He was finally freed from his teammates, so Feliciano fell back to walk with Ludwig to the gym. He looked at the blond curiously, “You’re pretty good, where did you learn to play?”

Ludwig shuddered, “When I was younger, my brother taught me and we would play with his friends. My brother was… aggressive in his teaching.”

Feliciano laughed into his hand, “That explains a lot. I can’t believe you tackled me though!”

Ludwig looked sheepish at that, bringing a hand to the back of his neck, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to. You aren’t hurt, are you?”

Feliciano thought he felt a bruise on his arm where he broke his fall, but he was pleased to note that he felt fine, “Nope! My brother taught me how to play too. He never hurt me, but he’s also extremely aggressive and hates to lose.”

“Makes sense.” Ludwig nodded, thinking that Feliciano did seem uncharacteristically confrontational during the match.

The class was released shortly thereafter, Feliciano now skipping down the sidewalk with Ludwig to his side. His arms were swinging widely, his body still buzzing from the recent victory.

Feliciano hummed in contentment, asking when they turned down an unfamiliar street, “So how far away do you live?”

“Not far, it’s about a twenty minute walk.” Ludwig said as he came to a stop. He pushed the button to activate the crosswalk, his eyes widening in surprise as he shot forward to snatch Feliciano by the wrist, “Pay attention!”

With a start, Feliciano looked up and realized he was about to walk obliviously into a busy intersection. He looked down to where his wrist had been captured, looking back up with a sheepish, “Whoops, sorry.”

Ludwig shook his head with a sigh, releasing the grip around the smaller’s wrist. Feliciano felt just a little miffed at the loss of contact.

The rest of the journey continued without incident, and Feliciano was remembering his earlier anxiety when they came up on Ludwig’s apartment building.

Okay, here we go. It’ll be fine. Feliciano thought as he climbed up the stairs. *I mean what’s the worst that could happen? I mean, Ludwig did say his brother was aggressive. And devious. Oh no, he sounds intimidating! What if he hates me? And he’s older than Ludwig, I bet he’s bigger than him too!* Feliciano imagined someone even more muscular and imposing than Ludwig, the thought sending him into a bit of a frenzy.

“Are you alright?” Ludwig suddenly asked, effectively breaking Feliciano out of his spiralling thoughts.

Feliciano offered a nervous smile, “Sorry, I’ll be fine.”

With a slow nod, Ludwig gestured down the hallway, “If you say so. I live just up here.”

He led them down the hallway and to one of the identical-looking doors that lined it. He reached into his pocket to retrieve a key before fumbling with the lock. Ludwig removed the key, reaching out to turn the doorknob when the door was suddenly thrown wide open:

“*Hallo!*”

Feliciano stood in shock as an albino man with startling red eyes stood in the doorway. He had his hands on his hips, wearing a smirk that just promised mischief as he hooked an arm around Ludwig’s neck to pull him down to his level.

“Gil, get off!” Ludwig protested, trying to shrug him off. But his brother simply ignored him in favor of staring intently ahead.

Feliciano squirmed as the man locked eyes with him, a contemplative look overtaking his face. Slowly, the man looked back down to Ludwig before releasing the hold around his neck. He suddenly smirked, laughing loudly as he addressed his brother, “You didn’t tell me he was so cute, *bruder!”*

Ludwig’s face was lit aflame, and he was left behind to sputter indignantly as the man sidestepped him to approach Feliciano with an outstretched hand, “The name’s Gilbert, Ludwig’s awesome brother. You must be Feliciano!”

Feliciano nodded in shock, letting Gilbert aggressively shake his hand. It took a few tries, but he was finally able to find his voice when his hand was released, “It’s nice to meet you.”

Gilbert responded with a toothy grin. He turned back to Ludwig, who was watching the whole exchange with an odd mixture of embarrassment and relief. The albino’s smile only grew as he bounded excitedly into the apartment, yelling loudly over his shoulder, “Well, come on in Feliciano! You’re in for a treat ‘cause I’m making dinner tonight!”

“God help us all.” Ludwig muttered.

Laughing brightly in amusement, Feliciano followed the blond into the apartment. He looked around, finding that the kitchen was directly in front of him with a small living room to the right. There was a hallway that led to what was presumably bedrooms, every wall painted a cool gray color. But despite the monotonous colors, an assortment of various books and knick knacks warmed the space right up. In all, Feliciano decided that this apartment was structure much like his own, although this one was clearly more modern.

Ludwig closed the door behind him, sighing as he turned to Feliciano with an embarrassed, “Sorry about him, he can be a lot to deal with.”

Feliciano giggled, “Don’t worry, I think he’s nice!”

“You think that now.” Ludwig grumbled when Gilbert shouted at them to hurry up.

The anxiety that had threatened to swallow him whole mere hours ago was slowly ebbing away, and Feliciano let his shoulders relax as he took a seat on one of the couches. Gilbert, while incredibly noisy, was nothing like the imposing figure that he had imagined.

Ludwig briefly disappeared down the hallway before returning with a laptop. He took a seat next to Feliciano, the cushions sinking to accommodate his weight. The result of the sinking cushions caused their legs to dip towards the middle, eliminating the small amount of space that was previously between them. Feliciano tried not to relax at the contact, but he couldn’t help but settle happily down at the blond’s side.

The light dusting of red on Ludwig’s face didn’t go unnoticed, but nobody commented on it as he opened his laptop. He created a new document, letting the cursor blink repetitively on the screen as he launched into the assignment, “Okay, so we should come up with some ideas about why our cliché is a poor device.”

Feliciano stuck his lower lip out in thought, “Well, you were saying in the library that it’s unrealistic. Why don’t we start with that?”

Ludwig nodded in agreement as he began tapping on the keyboard, “*Ja,* good idea.”

They worked silently together, an odd comment or two passing quietly between them as they made quick work of the essay. It probably would have gone on in peace, but Gilbert decided it was time to bestow his presence upon the two by sticking his head between them over the back of the couch, “Whatcha doin’?”

Ludwig shoved his brother's head away, barring his re-entry by throwing his arm across the back of the couch. Of course, the unintentional effect was that Feliciano fell closer to his side. But it seemed that it went unnoticed as he addressed Gilbert dismissively, "An essay for class."

Gilbert smirked, pleased with the situation he created, but that didn't stop him from whining about the dismissive way in which he'd been addressed, "Oh, come one. Give me something to work with here!"

"I don't know what you expect, it's just an essay." Ludwig huffed, eyes still trained on screen.

"Feli!" Gilbert suddenly yelled, completely ignoring his brother. "What're you guys writing about?"

Feliciano jumped at the sudden shout, feeling a little surprised at the pet name. It was something he only really heard from his family, but he quickly let it go as he peered up with a smile, "We had to write a story using a cliché last week, and now we have to write an essay about why we shouldn't use it when writing stories."

"*Pssh,* that's stupid." Gilbert said with a roll of his eyes, "If your teacher doesn't want you to use the cliché when you write, then what's the point of assigning the story in the first place?"

Feliciano shrugged, not having really thought about it like that.

"Whatever. So what cliché did you write about?" Gilbert probed.

"Does it matter?" Ludwig asked in annoyance.

Gilbert stood up, hands on his hips. "Well, excuse me for caring about my little *bruder's* education. What kind of sibling would I be if I wasn't interested in what you were learning about!" he called dramatically.

"You don't care." Ludwig pointed out. "You just want to stick your nose where it doesn't belong."

Gilbert gasped, putting a hand delicately over his heart, "Why, that's not true at all! I care very much about the quality of your education."

Ludwig didn't dignify that with a response, turning back to his computer screen without another word. Feliciano was struggling to contain his amusement, finding that Ludwig acted much more like the older brother.

Pouting when he realized that he was being ignored, Gilbert turned to the other teen, "Feli will tell me, right?"

Feliciano smiled, having no problem talking about a simple school assignment, *"Sì,* we decided to do 'love at first sight'."

Gilbert smirked, "Oh, really?"

“Yeah!” Feliciano nodded excitedly, “Ludwig says that it’s unrealistic, but I think it can happen.”

Gilbert hummed seriously, “*Ja,* I agree. Love truly works in mysterious ways.”

Ludwig huffed, fed up with his brother’s antics, “Do you smell something?”

“Shit, the stove!” Gilbert screamed, as he dashed away to the kitchen.

Feliciano watched him leave with a curious look, “I don’t smell anything.”

Ludwig smirked, “Neither do I, but the idiot believed it anyway.”

Laughing loudly at two brothers, Feliciano flopped his head to rest on the back of the couch where Ludwig’s arm was still draped.

Ludwig looked embarrassed at the action, but didn’t withdraw his arm. He could have sworn that he heard Gilbert cackling madly at the exchange from his place in the kitchen.

They managed to type the majority of their essay by the time Gilbert called them in for dinner. Feliciano took a seat, a bowl promptly set in front of him with what looked like beef stew with a chunk of bread. Despite Ludwig’s dark warnings about Gilbert’s cooking, it smelled delicious.

“Dig in, this is my specialty!” Gilbert said proudly.

Feliciano didn’t need another invitation. He immediately began shoveling the stew in his mouth, humming in contentment when he found the food tasted as delectable as the smell. Around mouthfuls of the savory stew, Feliciano was able to mumble, “Thank you, it’s delicious.”

“Of course it is, I made it!” Gilbert responded, digging into his own supper.

Ludwig snorted at that, “Two words: Apple. Pie.”

Gilbert immediately paled at the words, falling silent as he put his head down in shame. Feliciano turned a questioning gaze to Ludwig, but the blond only offered a cryptic smile.

With a shrug, Feliciano went back to his own meal.

They all ate in silence, everyone savoring the warm soup with varying degrees of satisfaction. Gilbert, never one to fall silent for longer than what was necessary, overcame his mood and instead turned to Feliciano, “So tell me about yourself. Where are you from?”

Feliciano looked up with a bright smile, “We moved here from the next city over. But before that, we lived in Italy.”

Gilbert nodded his head before asking, “And who is ‘we’?”

Feliciano pondered how he should answer the question, ultimately deciding on giving the whole truth, “Well, originally my brother and I moved in with our grandfather. Our friend moved in too after a little while.” He sighed, that pang of loss echoing dully in his chest, “Our grandfather died a couple months ago. We moved to this city and have been on our own ever since.”

The words were met by silence, Ludwig and Gilbert openly staring at him as they tried to form a response. The atmosphere was in danger of becoming awkward, so Gilbert cleared his throat with a sincere, “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Feliciano nodded in appreciation, trying to shrug off the topic, “Thanks, we’re alright.”

Gilbert nodded, deciding to lighten things up, “Out of curiosity, how old is your brother?”

Ludwig’s head whipped around to his brother, eyes flashing in warning.

Feliciano didn’t notice, “He’s nineteen, and Antonio is twenty-one.”

“Antonio?” Gilbert asked.

“Yeah! He and my brother have been together for years.” Feliciano nodded before his eyes widened in horror. Too late, he realized that he may have just outed Lovino on accident. He was going to backtrack, fearful of a negative reaction, when he was cut off:

“Damn, all the cute ones are taken.” Gilbert huffed.

“That is inappropriate!” Ludwig growled, flicking his brother harshly in the arm.

“Ow! What the hell?” Gilbert whined, rubbing viciously at his arm. “I’m just saying, if he’s as cute as Feli here, then I bet this Antonio’s got a real keeper.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Ludwig groaned in embarrassment, burying his face in his hands.

But Feliciano could only feel relief at the words. He had been afraid of a poor reaction from either Gilbert or Ludwig, but he could now see how ridiculous that fear was. Feliciano laughed brightly as the two brothers continued to bicker back and forth.

So Ludwig doesn’t care that Lovi has a boyfriend. Feliciano smiled a bit, not sure why that thought made warmth blossom in his chest.

Dinner was wrapped up shortly thereafter, and Feliciano offered to help with the dishes. But Gilbert was having none of it, shooing the teen away with a bright, “I got it, don’t you worry! Just leave the door cracked open, okay?”

Ludwig shot him a fierce glare, a look that only grew harsher when the albino sent an obnoxious wink his way.

Feliciano was just a bit confused by the words, but didn’t comment as he was led into what was clearly Ludwig’s bedroom. The blond had set the room up like a military barrack, and

Feliciano tried not to laugh at the characteristic strictness. Everything obviously had a place, and each part of the room seemed meticulously cared for.

The blond motioned for Feliciano to sit on the bed as he himself grabbed his desk chair. He pulled it up to sit next to the bed, laptop perched in his lap as Feliciano drew his legs underneath him on the bed.

There really wasn't much left to type, and Feliciano decided to let Ludwig complete the essay as he sat humming to himself. The constant *click* of keys and plush bed was lulling Feliciano into a relaxed stupor. The stew sat warmly in his stomach, providing further encouragement to just drift off completely as his eyes drooped. Feliciano tried to fight, he really did, but true to his nature, he let himself succumb to an impromptu *siesta.*

There was a hand on his shoulder, shaking lightly in disruptive little patterns. It wouldn't stop, and Feliciano grumbled wordlessly when he was forcefully pulled back from the bliss of unconsciousness. He didn't know where he was, but there was an impossibly soft bed beneath him, and it was *so* comfortable, and he was completely relaxed, and so sleepy…

"Feliciano."

No, I'm sleeping. Feliciano thought as he curled into himself, feeling a slight chill invade his senses.

The hand started shaking his shoulder again, but all Feliciano noticed was how warm it was. Eyes still squeezed shut, he reached up and guided the hand to his face. Feliciano sighed happily as the warm hand drove away some of the chill.

There was a sigh, but he paid it no mind. Somebody was sitting down on the bed next to him, and Feliciano could have sworn that they were laughing at him. The hand that he was holding to his cheek was extracted from his grip. He mentally lamented the loss of warmth, but was soon appeased when it moved to rest on top of his head. Feliciano hummed as the hand began moving delicately through his hair, and he felt himself being pulled back into a deep sleep-

"Hey, do you guys want any — *aww!*"

The hand in his hair was jerked away.

"Be quiet, Gil. What do you want?"

With a little pout, Feliciano cracked his eyes open to face reality once more. He stared in shock when it finally registered where he was, and who was sitting next to him.

I fell asleep on Ludwig's bed. His cheeks heated up,, but he was too comfortable to feel any real shame.

Gilbert noticed him wake up and gave a little wave, "Good morning sleeping beauty!"

Feliciano returned the wave, feeling more than seeing the way Ludwig shifted to look down at him. The blond didn't say anything, but he didn't move away either.

Rubbing groggily at his eyes, Feliciano sat up and stretched. He scooted back to sit against the headboard and next to Ludwig. He was sure that he'd feel embarrassed about the whole ordeal when he felt more awake, but for now Feliciano slumped his head over to rest comfortably on Ludwig's shoulder.

"I just wanted to know if you guys wanted some of the cookies I made, but I can see that you're busy." Gilbert shot a smirk his brother's way, receiving a glare in return.

Feliciano, still feeling the effects of his nap, could only nod in response. He waved once again when the albino finally exited, leaving the two teens on their own once more.

Ludwig's eyes shifted around awkwardly, fighting for something to say. He began pulling loosely at his hands, something that Feliciano hadn't seen him do in quite a while. The two had grown comfortable around each other, and he was rather pleased that their relationship had progressed as much as it has.

Feliciano still had his head rested on Ludwig's shoulder, feeling more awake than before, but all around too lazy to move away. He watched Ludwig wring his hands for a few minutes longer before he had enough. Feliciano reached down his own hands and rested them on top of the awkward blond's effectively putting an end to the constant twisting and fidgeting.

Ludwig looked up in shock at the movement, but didn't get the chance to speak as Feliciano whispered, "Sorry for falling asleep again."

"It's not a problem." Ludwig replied with a fond roll of his eyes, "I'm used to your uncanny ability to sleep anywhere."

With a breathy laugh, Feliciano began messing loosely with Ludwig's hands. He was pleased to note that he wasn't pulling away as he asked, "Is our essay done?"

"*Ja,* it's finished." Ludwig answered.

The room lapsed into an easy silence, each teen quite content to relax fully against the headboard. Feliciano felt another shiver run up his spine, pressing himself more firmly into Ludwig's side to try and dispel the wretched chill from his body.

Noticing the sudden pressure at his side, Ludwig looked down and asked, "Are you cold?"

"A little." Feliciano breathed, another shiver punctuating the statement.

Ludwig pulled his hands away from the loose grip and snaked an arm around the smaller's shoulders. The action clearly embarrassed him if the way he looked awkwardly around the room was any indication.

Feliciano smiled, finding the action sweet. He settled in, trying not to drift off again as he breathed, "Thanks, that's much better."

Ludwig grunted in response, suddenly finding the ceiling very interesting. He opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it closed but for any sound could escape his lips. He glared at the ceiling, finally forcing himself to grit out, "Can I ask you something?"

Nodding his approval, Feliciano said, “Sure, what is it?”

With a heavy sigh, Ludwig asked worriedly, “You don’t have to tell me, but what happened on Monday?”

Ah, I was hoping he wouldn’t mention that. I didn’t realize that he would still be worried about me.

Feliciano thought back to his breakdown on Monday and wondered just how bad he must have looked for Ludwig to bring it up days later. He sighed, realizing that he owed the blond at least most of the truth, “Um, it’s a bit of a long story, but I’ll give you the short version.”

With a nod, Ludwig shifted so that Feliciano was leaning more comfortably against him, “Whatever you’re comfortable telling me.”

Feliciano smiled in appreciation, launching into a short explanation, “So you know how I live with my brother?” the blond nodded. “Well, like I said, we lived with our grandfather until a couple months ago. He is — *was* — a very important person to us.”

He was so much more than that though.

“Did you live with him in Italy?” Ludwig prodded gently.

Feliciano grimaced, “No, he’s actually the reason we left. Lovino and I lived with my parents, but my mother left when I was still a kid. Our father…” he trailed off, not sure how much he should reveal about himself. “Um, let’s just say that he wasn’t the nicest man to be around.”

Ludwig nodded slowly, filing that tidbit of information away, “Understood. So, you left Italy…”

“Yeah around four years ago. Grandpa Roma took care of us.” Feliciano swiped at his eyes when he felt tears gather there. “He was so supportive. Lovi and I were kind of messed up for a while,” *I’m still pretty messed up,* “but grandpa was always there. He put his life on hold and moved away from his own country just for us.” Feliciano sniffled, beginning to grow angry with himself when he remembered just why he had the breakdown.

He struggled to get ahold of his emotions, his expression cycling between anger and grief. Ludwig watched on in mild concern, intent on stepping in when he was cut off:

“I started forgetting him.” Feliciano spat, squeezing his eyes shut. “I was drawing a portrait of him in art class, and I realized that I couldn’t remember his voice. I panicked.” He suddenly snapped his eyes up, allowing some of those tears to trail delicately down his cheeks, “I panicked because I couldn’t remember, how stupid is that?”

God, I’m so dramatic. Normal people wouldn’t freak out over something like that.

Ludwig tightened his grip, “No, it’s not stupid. He was somebody important to you, of course that would upset you.”

Feliciano nodded, still not entirely convinced that he wasn't just being dramatic. *'Looking for attention.' That's what our dad would say…*

"Yeah, well," Feliciano cleared his throat, "that's what happened. I just freaked out a bit, but I'm okay now." he said honestly, bringing a hand up to wipe away some of his tears.

"I'm glad." Ludwig said with a short nod. "I was afraid that somebody had done something to upset you."

Feliciano giggled and decided to tease as he dried the last of his tears, *"Aww,* you were worried about me? That's so sweet."

Ludwig went a bit stiff as he began stuttering, "Well, I-I mean if somebody had said something then… I don't know I guess I was worried and you seemed so upset and, I just…"

Feliciano watched the blond flounder, noting how his hair was starting to break free of its rigid style. Just like that day in gym class, he felt compelled to reach his hands up and fix it.

Ludwig stopped breathing altogether when he felt hands smoothing over his hair, completely suspended in the moment. In order to reach, Feliciano had to sit up and off his shoulder which positioned him directly in front of Ludwig's stunned face. He had his tongue stuck out in concentration, pulling away with a satisfied smile, "There, that's better."

Some sort of realization suddenly dawned on Ludwig, his mouth hanging just the slightest bit open.

It was Feliciano's turn to freeze as his face was suddenly gently held by a pair of warm hands. Ludwig wore a look of careful concentration, eyes shining an impossibly lovely shade of cerulean blue.

Wow, they're so bright.

Feliciano immediately moved to avert his eyes, fearful of being blinded, but Ludwig wouldn't let him turn away. He looked like he was searching for something, face scrunched up in what seemed like a mix of confusion and something softer — something he couldn't quite place.

The staring persisted, and Feliciano could feel just a touch of apprehension. But he was honestly quite content to just sit there, feeling more relaxed than he's felt in a long while. He let his shoulders slump completely, finally leaning into the touch as he smiled at the security he felt.

But it was short-lived when Ludwig suddenly released his grip. Despite this, he didn't make a move to pull away, still staring intently as he whispered, "I'm sorry, I just…"

"What?" Feliciano mumbled, smiling at the blond's bashful demeanor as he unconsciously leaned forward.

"Uh, nevermind." Ludwig breathed as he retreated.

At least, he tried to retreat, but was thoroughly prevented when Feliciano grabbed his face and tugged him forward in a huff. He was tired of the awkwardness, bridging the shallow gap and connecting their lips for a soft kiss.

It was short and innocent, really more of a peck than an actual kiss. Still, they both pulled away quickly with red faces. They stared at each other blankly, and Feliciano thought his heart might explode when he realized what he just did.

He dropped his hands like he'd been burned, scrambling to get away, "I-I'm sorry, I can leave if you want-"

But Feliciano's anxious backtracking was halted when he was drawn back for another kiss, this one just a little more forceful but no less sweet. Their lips moved together awkwardly, Ludwig unintentionally deepening it when he gripped the back of Feliciano's neck.

Feliciano tried to hold on, accidentally messing up the style he'd just fixed when he dug his fingers into stiff blond hair. He didn't seem to particularly care, but they were both forced to break away when the breathless nature of their actions threatened to suffocate them.

They both gasped, chests lightly heaving as they fought for breath. Feliciano had somehow ended up halfway in Ludwig's lap, bracing himself against the blond's chest.

Ludwig was suddenly smiling, saying breathlessly, "I think I've wanted to do that since the day I met you."

"Really?" Feliciano asked in astonishment.

Ludwig nodded, "*Ja,* it just took me some time to figure it out."

Feliciano smiled so widely he was sure his face would break in two. He threw his arms around Ludwig's shoulders and hugged him tightly. They sat happily together, relishing in their newfound closeness.

If he's really liked me this long, then that means…

Feliciano suddenly gasped, shooting straight up, "Wait, do you know what this means?"

"No?" Ludwig said confusedly

Feliciano grinned mischievously, poking the blond's cheek, " 'Love at first sight' isn't so unrealistic after all!"

Ludwig groaned and brought a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose, "Goddammit."

With a hearty laugh at the uncharacteristic swearing, Feliciano settled back down with a contented smile. He wore a self-satisfied smirk for the rest of their time together. Ludwig acted bothered by it, but didn't resist when Feliciano planted an apologetic kiss to his forehead. Gilbert just so happened to walk in at the sight, and he had no doubt that Ludwig would be teased relentlessly for it later.

Ludwig walked him home a while later, their hands linked as Feliciano swung their arms in a wide arc. Once they made it to their destination, he stood on the tips of his toes and pressed a small kiss to Ludwig's cheek, "*Grazie.*"

He pulled away, trying to not laugh at how flustered Ludwig seemed to be. Feliciano turned on his heel without another word, waving excitedly as he skipped into his apartment building.

Antonio was sprawled out on the couch, waving as the teen leaned against the closed door behind him, "Hi Feli!"

Feliciano smiled with a small wave, but didn't offer any words.

With a little smirk, Antonio scrutinized his face with a cheeky, "Your face is all red, are you feeling alright?"

Feliciano brought a hand up to his cheek, feeling the way heat radiated off of it. He smiled dazedly, eyes clouding over in happiness.

I'm wonderful, actually.

"Sì, I think I'll be fine."

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap my dudes, this is a long chapter. I was enjoying myself way too much, and it kind of got away from me, whoops. Oh well, I don't think anyone will get too upset with me.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading. Finally, our boys are together (it only took 40,000 words, omfg). Hope it felt like a natural progression of their relationship. I'm so excited to develop them as a couple, like woo.

Couple translations for those who need them:

Ja - Yes
Sì - Yes
Scheisse/scheiße - shit
Hallo - Hello
Bruder - Brother

Let me know if I missed any.

Thanks so much for reading. Let me know what you think!

'Till next time!

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano feared that it may be awkward to see Ludwig at school the next day, but was pleased to find that nothing really changed. They still sat next to each other in class like normal, shared the same shy glances, and they even sat together at lunch with Kiku.

In fact, the cafeteria was currently where Feliciano found himself. He was picking lightly at his normal lunch, not really eating it. He was planning on saving it for later, knowing that his family wouldn't be able to go to the store for a while. He wasn't supposed to know, but he overheard Lovino stressing about their increased rent again.

Well I start at the library today. I know it's not much, but every little bit counts.

The thought filled him with determination to be better, to be something of use to his little family. Feliciano knew that he would hardly make a dent in their monthly expenses, but if he could just make enough to afford groceries for the week, that would be enough.

"Are you not hungry?" somebody asked worriedly, thoroughly breaking Feliciano out of his own head.

He looked up with a start, noticing that Kiku was giving him a pointed look. Ludwig sat to his right, pausing in his own meal in favor of watching the exchange in front of him.

Feliciano's head swiveled warily between the two, but it was with a practiced ease that he masked it with a bright, "I actually had a big breakfast this morning, so I'm fine!"

"Are you sure? You should at least try to eat something." Ludwig chimed in.

That smile stayed firmly on Feliciano's face, but he did feel just a touch of guilt. With a small sigh, he slowly began munching on some chips in order to appease them. He was still getting pointed looks from Kiku (and now Ludwig too), but he was grateful when they let it go. Feliciano pushed his food away when they were no longer so fixated on him, ignoring yet another look of concern directed at him.

They wouldn't understand anyway.

Feliciano hummed quietly to himself, slumping over to the side. He dropped his head onto Ludwig's shoulder, much like he had the previous night, the memory bringing a small smile to his face.

Ludwig stiffened, and there was maybe (most definitely) a light painting of red over his cheeks, but he carried on with his lunch without comment.

Kiku was immediately suspicious, narrowing his eyes as he looked between them, "Something's different about you two,"

With a breathy laugh, Feliciano looped his arm through Ludwig's and peered up at him. He was amused to note that the blond adamantly refused eye contact with anybody, and least of all Kiku with that imploring gaze of his. They hadn't spoken about their relationship at all, and Feliciano wasn't even sure what to call it at this point.

Are we dating now? I think so, but maybe Ludwig doesn't.

Feliciano had always been a tactile person, so it wasn't terribly uncharacteristic for him to be hanging off of Ludwig's side — the resulting blush from the blond wasn't all that strange either. What was out of the ordinary was for Ludwig to return the gesture, tightening his grip in response.

There was an imperceptible nod from the blond, and Feliciano took that as permission, "We're actually together now!" he sang brightly by way of explanation, just the faintest bit of anxiety in his voice as he waited for a reaction.

Kiku simply nodded, "It's about time."

Feliciano's face twisted in confusion, "What?"

"You two always found a reason to be close to each other, especially you," Kiku sent a pointed gaze to Ludwig, "I thought it was obvious."

Ludwig made a choked noise at being called out on his actions, however unintentional they may have been. To his side, Feliciano also felt his face heat up, not knowing that they'd been *obvious*. Hell, neither of them had even identified their feelings until last night, but Kiku must have noticed something.

He must be a psychic.

"Oh, okay." Feliciano finally breathed, still just a bit embarrassed.

"Excuse me, I did not mean to be impolite." Kiku apologized with a little dip of his head.

"*Nein,* you're fine." Ludwig sighed, "Thank you for your acceptance."

Kiku looked up with a small smile, "Of course. I am very happy for you."

Feliciano marvelled over how easy that had been, how acceptance was so readily given from his friend. He hadn't even told his brother about their new relationship. It wasn't like he was opposed to telling him — after all, Lovino would be the last one to judge for his sexuality — but Feliciano wasn't sure how comfortable Ludwig was with everything. He made a mental note to talk about it with the blond later.

All too soon, lunch drew to a close. Feliciano packed his largely uneaten lunch up and shoved it into his locker. School breezed by, and after giving Ludwig a short hug and a promise to text him that weekend, Feliciano made his way outside to wait for Antonio.

He stood, watching the disappearing backs of Ludwig and other students drift further down the sidewalk until they were gone. He checked the time, noting that Antonio was running a

bit late — not really enough to worry, but Feliciano was awfully anxious right about then anyway. He had received a call from Roderich the other day asking if he could work a short shift as a bit of an orientation. The walk to the library couldn't be more than fifteen minutes, but he figured that it couldn't hurt to show up a little early.

Suddenly, Antonio came jogging through the front of the school. He was breathless from the run over, but he managed a bright smile when he noticed Feliciano waiting for him, "Sorry I'm late! I was dealing with a customer and they wouldn't stop yelling at me." He rubbed the back of his neck, his smile turning apologetic.

"Don't worry, you're really not that late!" Feliciano shrugged with a reassuring smile.

Antonio sighed in relief, "Good, I would hate to make you late to your first day at work." He elbowed the teen playfully in the side, a proud little smirk on his face.

Feliciano smiled up at him excitedly, the support bolstering his confidence. The anxiety he'd felt just so recently about his first day was dissipating — he was just too happy to finally be of use to his family.

They strolled down the sidewalk, neither in a particular hurry, but a slight chill urged them to move with a bit more urgency. Autumn was marching dutifully in, the cool wind an ominous harbinger of change as trees began shedding their decaying burdens.

Feliciano closed his eyes and breathed in the crisp air. He'd always loved how the leaves faded, the lively greens giving way to deep reds and warm yellows. Feliciano couldn't wait to draw them, so it was with a thoughtful hum that he asked, "Hey Toni, are there any parks around here?"

Antonio brought a hand to his chin in thought, "I think there's one not far from here, why do you ask?"

With a wistful gaze to the looming buildings above, Feliciano breathed softly, "The trees are always so pretty this time of year, it reminds me of home."

While the constant hum and bustle of the city carried with it a certain charm, nothing could beat the sweeping green fields of the Italian countryside. Feliciano remembered sprawling emerald hills that stretched for miles. The soft green was met by stunning azure skies that could put the Earth's mighty oceans to shame with its vibrancy and depth. If possible, it only grew more beautiful in the autumn, and Feliciano hoped to recapture just an inkling of that beauty in any way that he could.

I won't be able to find anywhere as beautiful as Italy, but a park may be a good place to start.

Antonio watched the teen carefully, feeling a tug in his own art at the blatant longing in his eyes, "Yeah, I know what you mean. I remember living in Spain before we moved." he sighed, eyes clouding over in memory, "The summers would be so hot that everyone would flock to the beaches. There was hardly anywhere to sit! But the ocean, *Buen Dios*, you could have sworn it was crystal."

The sadness that tinged just the edge of his tone was familiar, and Feliciano could feel himself nodding in agreement. He had never been to Spain, but he could empathize strongly with Antonio on those feelings of wistful nostalgia, “Do you miss it?’

“Of course I do,” Antonio immediately answered.

Feliciano looked down in silence.

I don’t know what I expected, of course he misses his own country. I bet he would go back if he could. He wouldn’t have to worry about me or Lovi anymore. He’d be free, away from us and-

“But I don’t regret moving.” Antonio breathed, smile no longer sad.

“You don’t?” Feliciano asked in shock.

Antonio shook his head, “Not at all. Spain is a part of me, like Italy is a part of you, but my home is with Lovi and his awesome little brother.” he threw an arm around the teen’s shoulders at the words, further driving the point home.

Feliciano’s chest felt warm, relieved that Antonio didn’t regret uprooting his entire life just for them. It hadn’t been an ideal situation at the time — honestly, it still wasn’t — but Antonio had made his decision to stay with them through it all.

“Well, it looks like we’re here!” Antonio suddenly announced.

Feliciano’s head whipped up in shock, too lost in his own silent musings to realize that they’d already made it. His heart sped up, but the warm arm around his shoulders offered the silent support Feliciano needed to fight that lingering sense of anxiety away, “Thanks for walking with me.”

“No problem. You’re done at seven, *sí?”*

Feliciano nodded, staring up at the large building before him.

“I’ll see you then, good luck!” Antonio said, ruffling the younger’s hair before taking a step back.

Feliciano nodded once more, taking a large step forward before he could take himself out of it. He turned over his shoulder with a small smile, finding Antonio smiling right back, “Thanks, Toni.”

Antonio waved excitedly in response, “You’ll do great!”

Feliciano was excited to start working, and he felt a smile work its way on his face. For once, he didn’t even notice the chaos of the first floor as he climbed the stairs. Ever the optimist, Feliciano didn’t even consider this job an annoyance or inconvenience as many high schoolers probably would. Instead, he saw it as an opportunity to pull his weight.

He took in one last breath, his resolve unshakeable now. It was time for him to prove that he was more than a burden, and it started with this.

Chapter End Notes

Hey all, sorry for the short chapter. Also, it's been a hot second (relative to me lol) since I posted. I'm sorry if this chapter seems forced or rushed, but I started noticing strange spots all over my skin. Long story short, I caught a viral infection that almost took me out. I'm alright now, but I can hardly stay awake for more than an hour at a time.

Anywho, it has come to my attention that I've been neglecting some of the other character I've introduced (a grave sin, indeed). Therefore, to right the wrong, I have something special planned for the next chapter. I think y'all are gonna enjoy it too ;)

I'm sorry I couldn't get a full chapter out about Feliciano's first day at the library, but for those of you who have had a job, you know that the first day is literally training and filling out paperwork. I definitely have plans for the library and stuff, and if any of you are just dying for a chapter about it I can make it happen sooner.

Long author's note, sorry lol. Thanks for being patient, I'm not allowed on my computer as much anymore 'cause apparently I need rest. But fear not! I will be a freaking writing machine when I am allowed so get hype :)

Bless y'all, and stay safe this New Year's.

'Till next time.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

> So this is a bit of an anthology, just wanted to let y'all know so you're not thrown off by the multiple changes of perspective!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Kiku sat perched on the ledge of a bridge, drawing pad in his lap as he let a feeling of tranquility overtake him. He was in a park, watching as leaves trailed lazily through the air before they rested delicately on the surface of the water. He didn't usually sit so precariously on a surface that was definitely not meant to be used as a bench, but he ignored logic for once in lieu of the stunning view he was now presented with.

The leaves were just beginning to change, some even falling. There were many couples walking together, dopey smiles and all, as they soaked up the perfect autumn aesthetic. Kiku smiled when he spotted some ducks swimming happily below him.

He turned back to his drawing pad and was about to capture the moment when a cat zipped across his lap. Kiku looked up in surprise, but was prevented from further reacting when a heavy body barrelled into him, nearly sending him careening off the ledge and into the murky water below.

"Whoops." somebody mumbled, and in the next moment Kiku felt a hand tangle itself in the collar of his shirt and haul him back to safety.

It happened so quickly, Kiku hardly had the time to react until his feet were planted firmly on the bridge and away from the ledge. He clutched the drawing pad close to his chest with wide eyes before remembering his manners. Kiku immediately turned with just the slightest dip of his head, "Thank you very much."

"Hmm? Oh, no problem." drawled a distracted voice.

Kiku peered up, curious to see who had saved him from an unfortunate dip in the creek. It was another teen around his age. He wore a neutral expression, chestnut brown hair framing his face. He was built and stood at least a head taller than Kiku himself, but he gave off an air of laziness. The teen was looking around frantically, obviously distracted by something.

Now curious himself, Kiku looked around to try and pinpoint just what the boy was looking for, "Um, what are you looking for?"

"I saw a cat and I'm trying to find her." was the surprising response.

Kiku remembered the cat that had torn across his lap moments before he had almost been sent sprawling. He looked off in the direction that it had been running and thought he saw a bush rusting.

He pointed at the bush, the tall boy's gaze following as he too spotted it. His face lit up as he rushed over. Kiku followed, feeling oddly invested in the search for the elusive cat.

"C'mere, kitty." the boy mumbled softly, digging through the bushes.

Kiku leaned in closer to get a better look, but jerked back in surprise when a squirrel jumped out and scampered away. He watched the small creature scramble up the tree, but his gaze was pulled back when he heard a disappointed sigh.

The boy stood and began scanning the park again. Kiku, feeling just a little bad about the dejected look on his face, stood next to him and asked, "Would you like some help?"

"Really?" he asked hopefully.

Kiku nodded with a small smile, "It is the least I can do."

"Thank you. My name is Heracles." was the short response.

"Kiku, it's nice to meet you." he said politely.

Heracles nodded, but he instantly went back to searching the park. He began walking away, eyes trained on anything a cat may use as a hiding spot.

What focus. I hope we are able to find his cat. Kiku thought, casting his own gaze around the park.

Their search was conducted over the entirety of the park, and Kiku was getting frustrated over how fruitless their efforts were. Heracles didn't say much, only letting out an occasional call or coo to try and coax the cat out of its hiding spot.

Kiku was prepared to throw in the towel after an hour of searching, but Heracles' single-minded determination kept him going. It was endearing, if not a little ridiculous the lengths he was willing to go for one cat.

Is it even his cat? There are a lot of strays in this area…

"There!" Kiku's thoughts were interrupted by the call. Heracles stood with an arm outstretched, pointing to a tree. There, curled up on one of the lower branches, was the cat.

Heracles grabbed Kiku's hand and dragged him over to the tree. They stood under the branch as Heracles brought his hands up, letting out a little groan of frustration, "I can't reach it."

Kiku also felt frustrated, knowing that they were *so* close to finally capturing the cat. Heracles tried calling to it, but he was ignored. The cat laid it head down to gaze lazily down at the two teenagers, almost like it was mocking them.

“Maybe we can find a taller person to help.” Kiku said logically.

Heracles sighed loudly, most likely annoyed with having to expend his precious energy talking to a stranger. He pouted, looking up the tree in mild annoyance. He looked over at Kiku with an appraising look, the gears beginning to turn in his mind, “Hey, come over here for a second.”

Kiku wasn’t sure if he trusted that glean in his eyes, but he nonetheless set his drawing pad gently down and made his way under the tree. Heracles stood silently behind him, and before Kiku could ask what the plan was, he felt his body being hoisted up into the air.

“Wha-?” Kiku scrambled for a grip, finding with some alarm that he was now perched on Heracles’ shoulders.

“Can you reach?” Heracles asked, sounding largely unbothered that he had just completely violated Kiku’s personal space.

“I don’t know. I would prefer if you *put me down now, please!*” Kiku shouted, squeezing his eyes firmly shut.

“I think I can get you close enough, here.” Heracles said, ignoring him entirely.

He took a step forward, and Kiku’s body pitched forward. He brought his hands to the top of Heracles’ head and gripped his hair to keep himself from tumbling down. As soon as he felt Heracles stabilize himself, Kiku peeked one eye open and was shocked to find a cat staring curiously back at him. He shot a hand out and crushed the cat to his chest, “I got it, now please let me down!”

Heracles hummed in acknowledgement, kneeling slowly down. He was almost low enough for Kiku to step down, but the cat must have gotten sick of being held and began squirming. Kiku did his best to hold onto the cat, but in the process he jerked harshly to the side. The sudden movement caused Heracles to lose his balance, and he crashed heavily into the ground.

Kiku, who had still been on his shoulders, groaned as he held the cat to his chest. He was laying on the grass, eyes trained on the clouds above. He felt Heracles shift by his feet, a hand to his head as he sat up.

“Oh, you got the cat.” he said, making grabby motions with his hands.

Kiku huffed loudly in annoyance, “Yes, no thanks to you.” he stood as he handed over the cat.

Heracles happily accepted the small creature, apparently feeling no remorse.

Kiku crossed his arms and glared down to where Heracles still sat on the ground, “That was completely irresponsible, we could have gotten hurt! Not only that, but you have invaded my personal space. We should have asked for help, but you didn’t listen.” he ranted, still miffed by the whole experience.

“Sorry, I just like cats.” Heracles said sheepishly as he pet the purring cat in his arms.

Kiku felt his annoyance begin to dissipate at the sincerity. He couldn’t stay mad, especially when Heracles truly looked apologetic. Kiku sighed, “Well, they are irresistible.”

Heracles smiled up at him, obviously agreeing.

With another exasperated sigh, Kiku bent down to retrieve his drawing pad. They walked together down the path until they returned to the bridge — where all this madness had started.

Heracles spotted a bench and slumped onto it with a tired smile, “Hey Kiku, I like you.”

Kiku felt his face burn. He was never one to be so forward, but apparently Heracles had no such reservations, “I found our time enjoyable as well.”

With a hum of agreement, Heracles let his eyes droop closed. The cat nestled comfortably on his lap. He was asleep almost instantly.

At least your cat loves you. Kiku thought, smiling softly at the lazy boy in front of him.

He picked up his drawing pad once more and flipped to a fresh page. He sat cross-legged on the opposite side of the bench, careful not to disturb the slumbering Heracles (or the cat, for that matter).

The soft sounds of sketching were the only thing that disturbed the peaceful blanket of silence that had descended on the park. The sun was beginning to dip, casting soft shadows across the landscape. Nothing escaped Kiku’s pencil as he continued to draw.

It had to have been an hour or so later when Heracles finally stirred. He sat up, clutching the cat gently to his chest. The first thing he noticed was that Kiku was no longer there. He felt a little disappointed, finding the reserved boy’s presence rather pleasant.

Heracles shifted, hearing a soft crinkle. He looked down and noticed a rectangular piece of paper, picking it up in order to inspect it.

It was a drawing of him, eyes closed as he dozed with the cat curled warmly in his lap. The shading captured the soft shadows that the sun cast on his face, perfectly illustrating the gentle way his hair fell into his face. Heracles smiled — the picture had obviously been drawn with care.

He looked down at the cat, “How nice, maybe I should get him something too.”

The cat meowed in response.

“Yeah, I agree.” Heracles yawned and leaned back as he let his eyes close once more, the drawing of him held lightly in his hand.

Ludwig fidgeted loosely with his hands as he climbed an unfamiliar flight of stairs. He had received a text from Feliciano asking if he wanted to go to the park and really, what else could Ludwig say except *yes?*

He absently wondered if this was considered a date. Gilbert had mentioned something about that, as well as some embarrassing pick-up lines that he straight up refused to repeat.

What was really eating at Ludwig currently was the prospect of meeting Feliciano's family. He knew that the anxious teen lived with his brother and his brother's boyfriend, but aside from that limited knowledge, he was going in pretty blind. Ludwig wanted to make a good impression, especially since Feliciano hadn't revealed the nature of their relationship to his family yet — he'd said he wanted to ask him something first.

Ludwig sighed, walking down the hallway as he looked for the correct door. The apartment building was in a mild state of disrepair, something that Ludwig had noticed instantly by the sketchy nature of the elevator (one glance at it dissuaded him from even approaching it). The yellow lighting and chipped paint betrayed how old the building must have been, and how many years since anyone had bothered to do anything about the outdated decorations or dirty linoleum floor.

He marched his way down the depressing hallway and checked his phone to make sure that he had the correct apartment. Upon noting that he was indeed in the right place, Ludwig lifted his hand to knock on the door…

...and froze.

C'mon, just do it. He mentally encouraged.

Ludwig shook his head and tried to knock again, only to freeze once more.

Pull yourself together, just what in the hell are you so afraid of? he thought with a growl. Finally, he brought his hand down and knocked on the door.

Ludwig waited nervously for somebody to answer, wondering what Feliciano's brother was like — hopefully he was as harmless as his own brother. In fact, the more he thought about it, the less intimidated he felt about meeting him.

This is Feliciano's brother, how bad could it be?

At that thought, the door whipped open and Ludwig came face to face with a very irate Italian. He almost had to do a double-take, thinking that it was Feliciano who had answered the door. However, the scowling face and closed-off posture that positively *screamed* hostility didn't look very much like Feliciano at all. The more Ludwig looked, the more he could spot some subtle differences — like his darker hair and green eyes.

"Who the hell are you, and what do you want?" the man demanded.

Ludwig's mind blanked for a moment, trying to remember what he was there for. The shock of meeting what had to be Feliciano's older brother had rendered him momentarily

speechless.

“Oi, did you hear me? Or are you just stupid?” the man asked with a snarl.

Ludwig cleared his throat, “Sorry, I’m here to pick Feliciano up. I’m Ludwig.” He offered his hand to shake.

“Lovino,” was the terse introduction. The hand Ludwig offered was ignored. Instead, Lovino turned his head over his shoulder and called into the apartment, “Hey, the potato-bastard is here!”

Ludwig thought that he heard somebody in the apartment yell back in acknowledgement, but was forced to turn his attention back to the fiery Italian when he took a menacing step forward. Lovino didn’t say anything, just stared with vicious eyes. Despite the fact that Ludwig stood almost a full head taller than the ill-tempered man in front of him, he was alarmed to note that he felt like he was being looked down on.

“Um, it’s nice to meet you?” Ludwig tried.

“Fucking save it for someone who cares.”

Mein Gott, he’s nothing like Feliciano at all. Ludwig thought as he endured the glare Lovino had fixed on him.

Suddenly, a head poked out of the door as another man emerged from the apartment. He was taller than Lovino, but still shorter than Ludwig himself. He had chestnut brown hair and a golden tan, but what was most notable was the welcoming smile on his face, “Hi! You must be Ludwig.” At Ludwig’s nod, the man offered his hand, “I’m Antonio, it’s nice to meet you!”

“Likewise,” Ludwig said, shaking his hand. He was relieved that there was at least one friendly face to greet him.

“Well don’t just stand there, come in!” Antonio sang brightly. He threw an arm around Lovino’s shoulders, who surprisingly allowed himself to be led (though not without an irritated grumble).

Ludwig followed after a moment of hesitation, looking around the apartment in mild interest. It was small, and like the rest of the building, clearly outdated. Despite that, it felt inviting, if not a little messy.

“Feli should be out in a few, why don’t you take a seat.” Antonio said pleasantly as he gestured to the couch.

“Thank you,” Ludwig responded as he gingerly took a seat. He noticed with some trepidation that Lovino sat in the chair off to his immediate left. Antonio had disappeared to the back of the apartment, leaving Ludwig to endure the intensity of that gaze alone

He broke into a small sweat as those smoldering eyes remained fixated on them, but he kept his face carefully neutral.

Lovino crossed his arms, asking in an accusing voice, “Just what are you to my brother?”

“Excuse me?” Ludwig asked in shock.

Lovino growled, “Oh don’t play dumb with me, bastard. Don’t think I don’t know what you’re trying to do.” he leaned forward in his chair to scrutinize the blond further.

“I’m not following.” Ludwig deadpanned, truly confused.

“Fucking-” Lovino brought his thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose and let out a long-suffering sigh, “Listen,” he stood up and made his way over to where Ludwig was sitting, bringing their faces uncomfortably close, “I don’t like you,” here a finger was pushed aggressively into his chest, “but for some reason my brother does. If you do *anything* that makes him even remotely uncomfortable I. will. *end.* you. Got it?”

Each word was emphasized with a poke, and Ludwig audibly gulped as he nodded his head. Lovino pulled back and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Sorry, I was still getting ready!” trilled a bright voice. Ludwig looked up and breathed a quiet sigh of relief when Feliciano rushed into the living room.

He paused, looking curiously to where Ludwig was sitting awkwardly over to where his brother stood, still glowering. Feliciano huffed in disapproval, “Lovi, you weren’t being mean to Ludwig, were you?”

Lovino shrugged, making his way over to where Antonio had returned. He didn’t comment, but the glare he directed at the blond was evidence enough.

Feliciano rolled his eyes, annoyed at his brother’s actions, but clearly not surprised.

I wonder if he’s always like that. Ludwig thought, wondering what caused Lovino to act with such blatant hostility.

Ludwig felt a hand on his shoulder, looking up to see Feliciano trying to get him to stand. He also felt Lovino’s eyes snap to him at the action, and he was unable to stop the resulting shudder.

“Are you ready to go?” Feliciano asked, apparently oblivious to the annoyed look on his brother’s face.

“*Ja.*” Ludwig said, feeling just the slightest bit desperate to escape Lovino’s hostile eyes. He followed Feliciano to the door, eager to leave.

“Have fun, you two!” Antonio called happily after them.

Lovino rolled his eyes, but an elbow in his side made him look up, “Ow, what the hell?” he complained, but Antonio simply stared him down until he had no choice but to say, “Yeah, yeah. Have fun, or whatever.”

Ludwig was impressed by Antonio's bravery — he wondered if he'd ever have the courage to stare Lovino down like that.

Feliciano smiled in response and led them out the door. Ludwig felt the tension leave him as soon as the door closed behind him.

They walked down the hallway in silence before Feliciano finally rounded on him, "I'm sorry if Lovi said anything to you! He's just kind of-"

"Overprotective? *Ja,* I think I got that." Ludwig said with a small smile.

Feliciano groaned, "He's not always like that. I mean, not really…" he seemed to think about it for a second, "Actually, nevermind. He kind of is."

Ludwig laughed softly. The stark difference between Feliciano and his brother was truly astounding. He had no idea how two people who looked so similar could sound and act so differently.

Then again, Gilbert and I are nothing alike.

They exited the building and turned onto the busy sidewalk. It was just after noon, and the sun hung high in the sky. Despite this, there was a slight chill, although it wasn't harsh enough to really notice. But it would provide a perfect opportunity to wrap an arm around Feliciano's shoulders, and he intended to. However, a creeping sense of paranoia kept his arm at bay — the thought of Lovino watching them from the window enough to send another shudder up his spine.

Apparently Feliciano was of the same mindset because the second they were out of direct view of the apartment, he slipped his hand into Ludwig's

The blond gripped back, smiling faintly as Feliciano started swinging their arms in a wide arc.

The walk to the park wasn't long, and when it did come into view, Feliciano gasped and pointed wildly in excitement, "Ludwig, it's so pretty! Look at all the colors!"

Ludwig hummed in agreement, far more distracted with the way Feliciano's face seemed to light up. His energy was infectious, and Ludwig felt warmth bloom in his chest at the display of childlike excitement.

Feliciano began dragging Ludwig forward, trying to get to their destination faster. The blond let himself be dragged, looking around the park properly when they finally arrived. It was truly beautiful, the trees a mosaic of warm colors and textures. A small creek bubbled pleasantly to the side as a winding pathway stretched out before them.

Ludwig was forced to release Feliciano's hand as he rushed forward to get a better look at the flowers — many of which were sadly wilting away. He felt just a little dejected at the loss of contact, but quickly shook himself out of it, "What would you like to do?"

Still kneeling before the bed of flowers, Feliciano peered up with a confused look, “I don’t know, what do people usually do in parks?”

Ludwig thought about it, “Well, I suppose they walk along the trail or sit on a bench. I think there are some food vendors up ahead, if you want to check that out.”

Feliciano smiled, “Yes, please!” he reached his hands up cutely, clearly asking to be hoisted up.

Ludwig very nearly rolled his eyes, but nonetheless reached down and pulled the little Italian up next to him.

They walked side by side, Feliciano’s head restlessly swivelling as he tried to take in the pretty leaves. Ludwig was openly staring, and suddenly remembering the loss of warmth, he reached his hand out. He found what he was looking for, pleased to note the way Feliciano interlocked their hands.

“This is so nice, thank you for coming with me!” Feliciano smiled.

Ludwig could lose himself in the pureness of the small teen next to him, “Any time.”

A little ways ahead they found the food vendors. Feliciano noticed a particular place that sold hot chocolate, and started walking over. After a short wait in line, both of them sat on a bench nursing steaming cups of the sugary drink. Feliciano leaned into Ludwig’s side, both of them enjoying an easy silence.

Across the way, Ludwig watched in slight amusement as a man ran by chasing a… a *cat?* He shook his head, but his attention was pulled back when Feliciano said, “So I actually wanted to ask you something while we were here.”

“Yes?” Ludwig prompted curiously.

“Well, when Kiku asked about us and I told him that we were together, that got me thinking.” Feliciano said, looking just a little nervous. Ludwig had no doubt that he would be picking at his nails if he wasn’t holding the cup of hot chocolate, “What are we?”

Ludwig looked down in confusion, “What do you mean?”

Feliciano groaned in frustration, “Like, what do you call this? Are we dating now?”

Ludwig nodded, setting his cup off to the side, “I understand. And yes, I think it’s safe to say that we’re dating now,”

Feliciano still looked a little uneasy, “Okay, but are we boyfriends? Like, don’t people make a big deal about making it ‘official,’ or whatever?”

Ludwig thought it was funny how Feliciano managed to fret over something so little. He smirked, deciding to ease his troubled mind with one quick movement. He brought his head down and placed a light kiss to Feliciano’s lips, so quick that it could hardly be considered a

real kiss. Ludwig pulled away, noting in amusement how shocked he seemed to be, “I’ll be whatever you want me to be.”

A smile slowly worked its way on Feliciano’s face as he registered the words. He launched himself (mindful of the scalding drink in his hand) at Ludwig and hugged him tightly, “Then I want you to be my boyfriend!”

Ludwig nodded, holding him as he hid a smile in his shoulder. He didn’t know exactly what they were getting into, but he was content to sit back and see where it went. Ludwig relaxed, but a soft groan of disgust had him snapping his eyes open to glare at a staring couple. He huffed loudly in annoyance, glare as fierce as ever, as the gawking couple backed off almost immediately.

Feliciano pulled back, “Did you say something?”

The glare melted off his face in an instant, “It was nothing.”

Feliciano accepted the answer and settled back down, dropping his head to rest on Ludwig’s shoulder — a position that was quickly becoming commonplace. They sat and absorbed the tranquil atmosphere that surrounded them, the shimmering sunlight taking the edge off the chill. Feliciano seemed transfixed by the vibrant colors, his gaze content. Ludwig relaxed and found himself watching Feliciano more than the delicate leaves.

He would have to drop Feliciano back off at his apartment and brave Lovino once more, but for now things were perfect. Even if Ludwig was just a bit intimidated by Feliciano’s overprotective brother, he knew he would do anything if it meant he could keep the bubbly Italian at his side.

With a pang, he realized that he was in danger. His feelings already ran so deep, and with every smile he knew that he was falling further for the excitable little Italian. He felt danger at the prospect of ever losing him, knowing it would most likely be a hurt he had never endured before.

So I won’t lose him, then. Ludwig thought with resolve.

He smiled as he brought an arm around Feliciano’s shoulders and pulled him in to kiss the top of his head. Feliciano laughed sweetly at the gesture as he smiled up at him, the sun casting soft shadows on his face, *and mein Gott, I would do anything for him.*

Ludwig sighed, knowing that these perfect moments were fleeting, and that there would be hardships ahead. After all, the sneering couple was just a taste of the disdain and scorn that they would endure. But Ludwig thought that it would be worth it so long as Feliciano kept on smiling like that.

Things would be tough, but Ludwig was willing to face it all for the sake of the small, anxious, excitable, *perfect* person nestled warmly into his side.

Alfred groaned loudly as he kicked a rock down the road, glaring intently ahead. He was frustrated, and very, *very* annoyed.

“Just who the hell does he think he is, leaving those stupid notes.” he grumbled.

Ever since Ivan had left the first note in history, Alfred had been growing more irritated by the cryptic Russian. The increasing frequency of the notes only furthered his unease.

It had begun innocuous enough, a simple compliment about his beloved jacket. But it was the fact that it was Ivan, his sworn enemy, leaving the notes that bothered him. Matthew had taken one look at the note and laughed in his face, *the traitor.*

After that, the notes continued. They were always compliments, things like *You look nice today,* or *Did you do something different to your hair? I like it,* and there was even a note with a piece of chocolate attached, and fuck if Alfred didn’t love chocolate.

His twin had been completely unhelpful in deciphering the notes, opting to watch him flounder. Alfred had no idea how to respond, or even if he should. The notes could almost be considered flirting but — *no, absolutely not. No way is that commie bastard flirting with me. Just. No.*

Alfred shook his head aggressively, trying to expel the thought from his head.

He sighed as he made his way into the park. The latest note that he had received had been particularly worrisome — it had simply asked him to come to the park on Saturday afternoon. Alfred was going to ignore it, but Matthew’s irritating nagging had finally broken him.

“*Go to the park, Al. You’ll have fun, Al.* Yeah, whatever.” Alfred mumbled, doing a poor imitation of his brother (which was actually pretty sad, given how they were twins and all).

Alfred looked around and nearly gagged at the amount of couples walking around, saccharine smiles and all. He nearly snorted when he thought he saw a familiar hyperactive figure hanging off a tall blond.

“God, this is too much.” Alfred said, about to spin on his heel and stalk off. However, he was frozen when a shadow engulfed his figure, causing a chill to creep through his body.

Alfred jumped back, and brought his hands up like he was getting ready to fight. But instead of the horde of ninjas that he had expected (imagined), he was met by curious purple irises.

“What are you doing?” came a heavily accented voice.

Alfred was quick to stand up straight, pretending that he wasn’t just preparing to unleash his (nonexistent) martial arts skills upon the tall Russian, “Heh, nothing.”

Ivan just shrugged and started walking forward, and right past Alfred.

Alfred stood shocked for a moment, before he scrambled to catch up, “Hey! You can’t just tell me to meet you here then ignore me!”

Ivan peered down at him, “I’m not ignoring you.”

Alfred sputtered indignantly, “You just walked right by me like I wasn’t even there!”

“But I’m talking to you now, *da?* I knew if I walked, you would catch up.” Ivan smiled brightly.

Alfred ground his teeth, realizing that he had played right into the Russian’s hands, “Pssh, I’m following you to get answers. Not because I care or anything.”

"Of course not." Ivan all but sang with that infuriating little smile of his.

Alfred grumbled as they kept walking, neither exchanging a word. Ivan began to hum pleasantly to himself, and it was beginning to get annoying.

"Look, what are you trying to do here?" Alfred asked as he came to a sudden stop.

Ivan stopped too, looking back curiously, “What do you mean?”

Alfred groaned and gestured wildly to the park, “I mean this. Why are you leaving notes, why have you been nice to me lately, and *why the hell are we at a park!?*”

Ivan brought a hand to his chin contemplatively, “Would you prefer I stop being nice to you?”

Alfred finally had enough, “No, that’s not what I mean! Just tell me if you’re messing with me or not because honestly? I can’t freaking tell with you.”

Ivan looked on calmly (*he’s always so calm, what the hell!*), as he finally walked up to Alfred and said, “I’m not messing with you. I asked you to come to the park because I wanted to ask you something.”

“And you had to ask it here?” Alfred asked suspiciously.

“That’s correct!” Ivan confirmed cheerfully.

“Ugh, okay. What did you want to ask me?” Alfred grumbled.

Ivan smiled, “I would like you to become one with me, *da?*”

Alfred looked at him for a second, face blank. All of a sudden, he felt all the blood rush directly to his face as a furious blush engulfed his entire being. He sputtered, waving his hands as he looked for a response. Ivan — *the bastard* — just smiled on pleasantly, as if he hadn’t just made the most embarrassing innuendo Alfred had ever heard.

Finally, Alfred was able to force out, “Dude! You can’t just say that to people!”

Ivan looked confused, “But why not?”

Alfred pinched the bridge of his nose as he looked at his (*former?*) rival, “Just, like, don’t say it like that.”

Ivan still looked a little confused, but brushed it off, “I am not good at romance-” Alfred made a choking noise at the word, “-but I thought leaving nice notes and taking you somewhere pretty was a good idea.”

Alfred could only nod, still far too embarrassed by the situation to respond. They were still stopped right in the middle of the walkway, and some people were giving them dirty looks as they were forced to walk around.

In all honesty, Alfred wasn’t sure how to respond. Sure, he and the Russian’s relationship hadn’t always been good. Hell, he had declared Ivan his sworn enemy the first day he had met him. But, well, they had matured. Instead of sharing hateful glares, they had come to exchanging competitive looks as they launched into whatever argument they deemed worthy of their shouting (well, Alfred would shout. Ivan usually just smiled creepily and shot snide comments at him). Ivan wasn’t so much his enemy anymore, more like a rival. But now it seemed that it could develop into something else entirely.

What do I say? I don’t hate the commie bastard, sure, but we have never been friends per se. I mean sure I love arguing with him, and we always find an excuse to debate each other, but… Alfred’s mind spun in circles.

Ivan waited patiently, but even he had a limit apparently, “Don’t think too hard, you might hurt yourself.”

And just like that, things were back to normal.

“Hey! I can think just fine!” Alfred yelled.

He was forced to follow as Ivan started walking again, “Really? Your face is red, it looks so painful. Maybe you should take a break.” he said condescendingly.

Alfred balled his hands into fists, “Heroes never rest! And besides, you’re the reason my face is so red in the first place!”

Ivan smirked evilly, “Why? All I asked is if you wanted to become one with me.”

“Stop saying that dude! And even if I do, I wouldn’t say it like that!” Alfred brought both his hands to his mouth, trying to take back the words.

Oh man, I cannot believe I just said that!

Ivan looked pleased, “So is that a yes?”

Alfred groaned in distress, “I mean, if you’re asking to go on a date or something…” he trailed off looking angrily at the ground.

“Go on, I’m listening.” Ivan said, savoring his rival’s state of disarray.

Alfred growled, “Do you want me to say ‘yes’ or not? Because right now, you are single-handedly changing my mind.” Ivan smiled innocently, but held his silence. “Ugh, I mean I guess it’s a yes. But-”

Whatever he was going to say next was cut off as Ivan pulled him into a warm hug. Alfred could feel his bones grinding, thinking that Ivan was literally trying to crush him (just as he had threatened on many occasions), “Yay! Now, let’s go. I want to show you something.”

Alfred was released, and he was left reeling. He couldn’t figure out what just happened, but he was pretty sure that he was now dating a certain Russian. In a daze, Alfred nodded as he was whisked away to the other side of the park.

Dude what was that? Alfred thought. In the back of his mind, he thought he could hear Matthew cackling madly at him.

He was led to a secluded part of the park, a small field spread out before them. Alfred could see that the field had consisted of flowers, but the chilly autumn air had caused nearly all of them to wilt.

Ivan breathed in deeply, smiling as he took in the flowers. He turned to Alfred and said, “Do you see them?”

Alfred looked out in confusion, not knowing what he was referring to, “Uh, the flowers? Yeah, they’re nice but most of them are dead.”

Ivan’s smile turned a bit sad, “*Da,* you’re correct. But look there,” he pointed.

“The sunflowers?”

Ivan nodded happily, “They’re my favorite.”

Alfred watched as Ivan smiled the most genuine smile he had ever seen from him. He felt himself smile slightly too, not looking at the flowers as he said, “Yeah, I think they’re nice too.”

He let himself lean slightly into the Russians warm body, trying to fight the slight chill. Ivan looked down on him, noticing the way he pulled that infamous bomber jacket closer around his body. Without a word, he unwrapped his scarf and draped it gently around him. Alfred looked up in shock.

“You looked cold.” Ivan smiled sweetly (and it was sweet, and not the usual provocative grin, Alfred noted).

Alfred nodded and smiled slightly. This was completely new to him, but he was excited to find out where this led.

Later, as they walked down the pathway together (arguing about anything and everything), Alfred discreetly pulled out his phone and shot a text to his brother.

To: Mattie

Yo dude, have I got a story for you!

Antonio laughed lightly in amusement as he watched Lovino scrambling to the window. He was grumbling to himself, clearly not happy.

“Lovi, what are you doing?” Antonio asked, although he had a pretty good idea what, or rather *who*, his ill-tempered boyfriend was looking for.

“I’m making sure that potato-bastard doesn’t try anything shady.” Lovino growled, eyes fixated on the street below.

Antonio sighed, but could feel a wave of fondness crash into him. He made his way over to where Lovino was pressed against the glass, wrapping his arms around his waist, “Do you see them, yet?”

“Not yet — Wati! There they are!” Lovino practically yelled, glaring down at the spot where Feliciano and Ludwig were walking down the street. Antonio watched quietly with Lovino, laughing when he grumbled about the ‘damn potato-bastard.’

Lovino only tore his gaze away from the window when the two turned down a corner. He was still obviously annoyed, but he was probably more irritated that he couldn’t stalk his brother’s date — he had tried to convince Antonio. Repeatedly.

“You know that they’re dating, right?” Antonio asked carefully, trying to gauge Lovino’s reaction.

He huffed loudly, “Don’t remind me.”

Antonio smiled, “You’re taking this pretty well, Lovi. I thought that you’d be angry when Feli didn’t tell you about their relationship.”

“Yeah, well…” Lovino struggled with his words, glaring intently at the floor. “He needs to feel comfortable enough to bring it up first. I’m not gonna make him do anything that he’s not ready for. Even if that blond bastard pisses me off…” he trailed off.

Antonio felt pride well up in his chest. Feliciano hadn’t told either of them about his relationship with Ludwig, but it was more than a little obvious. He remembered how Feliciano had come back from Ludwig’s apartment bright red, a dopey smile plastered on his face. Antonio had worn that very look more times than he cared to count, and knew instantly what was going on.

Ah, young love. I remember me and Lovi’s first kiss. His face turned all red just like a tomato! Antonio smiled fondly at the memory.

“Oi, you better not be thinking of anything embarrassing, bastard!” Lovino shouted.

“I was just remembering our first kiss, Lovi!” Antonio said brightly, noting how Lovino’s face turned red — *just like it did back then!*

“Well fucking stop it!” Lovino huffed, averting his eyes in embarrassment.

“But why would I do that?” Antonio grinned mischievously as he sauntered his way closer to his sputtering boyfriend, “Do you remember how it went? I think it was a little something like this.” He brought his hand up and tenderly brushed Lovino’s bangs out of his face, resting his other hand on the small of his back as he brought their faces mere inches apart.

“Idiot, what do you think you’re doing?” Lovino asked, face turning an interesting shade of scarlet.

“That’s not what you said back then, Lovi. I remember the way you said my name, you were so nervous.” Antonio chuckled lightly before realizing, “Actually, I was pretty nervous, too.”

Lovino snorted, “Try terrified. You couldn’t even look me in the eye,” he said as he looped his arms around Antonio’s neck.

“You got me there. But you were just so pretty, and we were both so young.” Antonio sighed as he pressed their foreheads together.

“We’re still young,” Lovino mumbled wistfully.

“*Sí,* so young. But we’ve also grown up a lot, too.” Antonio smiled.

“And how do you figure that?” Lovino asked, suspicious with the way one of Antonio’s hands moved to cup his cheek.

“Well, for starters, I can do this-” He pulled Lovino into a deep kiss, pulling their bodies close as he shifted his hand from Lovino’s cheek to his hair. It was swift, but Antonio was still a bit breathless from the kiss as he said, “-without you hitting me.”

Lovino eyed him, looking like he might just hit him after all, but was a little too stunned by the kiss.

Antonio brought his hands to his hips, “And I can finally look you in the eyes when I tell you that I love you,” He smiled as Lovino struggled to maintain eye contact. “And I know you won’t say no when I ask you on a date.”

Lovino laughed, realizing what was going on, “Is that your shitty way of convincing me to go out with you?”

“Maybe.” Antonio looped his arms around Lovino’s waist, “Did it work?”

Lovino sighed, “Yeah, I guess.”

Antonio smiled brightly, hugging Lovino tightly to his chest, “I’m glad! I saw some street performers down the road, and they were playing such pretty music, and I wanted to go see them and-”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it. Jeez.” Lovino huffed as he pulled away, “Just give me a few minutes to get ready.”

Antonio nodded excitedly, also moving to get ready.

Ten minutes later, and they were out the door. Antonio led the way down the street to where he saw the musicians from last time. He could hear the music drifting through the air as they got closer, finally arriving at a small square. There were a few tables scattered sporadically around, and a café nestled comfortably in the corner. An older man stood with a guitar, strumming a pretty little tune as a few people gathered around to listen.

Antonio hummed along to the song as he dragged Lovino closer, noting the way his boyfriend didn't resist (bar a small grumble of annoyance).

He began swaying to the rhythm of the music, getting lost in the sound. A few other people were dancing too, and Antonio decided to pull Lovino even closer to him.

"Hey, what are you doing, bastard?" Lovino growled irritably as he was forced to sway in time with Antonio guiding his movements.

"It's called dancing, Lovi." Antonio said as he put one hand around his waist and interlocked the other with Lovino's.

"Yeah, I know what fucking dancing is, idiot." he growled.

Antonio laughed loudly at the characteristic retort, and also at the awkward way his boyfriend moved. Despite his grumblings, Antonio didn't miss the small smile that he fought to hide, "You're allowed to enjoy yourself, you know."

Lovino shot a fierce glare at him, but opted to remain silent.

The two glided across the small clearing, Antonio's smooth movements ensuring they stayed in time. The music was a sweet little melody, most likely some kind of generic love song. Some of the crowd turned away from the guitarist to instead watch the dancing couple as they continued their light swaying.

"It seems we have an audience," Antonio chirped happily.

Lovino looked up, and was shocked to note that they indeed had a sizable crowd cheering them on. He put his head down, trying to ignore them. Instead, he focused on Antonio and the way he guided their dance.

They began twirling, Antonio supporting Lovino as he almost lost his footing at multiple points. The music was crescendoing for one final, perfect moment as he pulled Lovino close for the final steps. And then, it was over. Their small audience applauded loudly as the two both gasped for air.

Antonio stood to face the audience with a bow — Lovino simply stood awkwardly to the side. Among those who were applauding was the guitarist, and Antonio suddenly got an idea.

"I'll be right back," he announced, pressing a quick kiss to Lovino's cheek.

Antonio smirked when Lovino's face went bright red, but he didn't comment further as he walked over to the guitarist. After a few words, and a nice tip on Antonio's end, the man pulled the neck strap over his head and handed his guitar off.

Dios, it's been a while, Antonio though, strumming a few chords as he tried to get used to the feeling of the guitar in his hands once more.

After a few moments, he drew in a deep breath and locked eyes with Lovino. He began playing, noting the way his boyfriend's eyes lit up in recognition.

Ah, he remembers this one. Good.

Antonio mesmerized the audience with the melancholy tune that he strummed, nobody daring to breathe. He took in another breath and started to sing:

"No quiero estar sin ti
Si tú no estás aquí me sobra el aire
No quiero estar así
Si tú no estás la gente se haré nadie."

Antonio would usually close his eyes as he played, but he made sure to keep them trained solely on Lovino. He kept singing, his voice painting the silence with the passionate delivery of the vocals. Lovino had a hand pressed to his mouth as he watched. Antonio sang on:

"Si tu no estás aquí no sé
Que diablos hago amándote
Si tú no estás aquí sabrás
Que dios no va a entender por que te vas."

Lovino was definitely about to cry, or that's what Antonio thought as he watched his face crumple just the smallest bit. Antonio used to play all the time, but he was forced to sell his guitar and most of his belongings in order to raise enough funds to follow Lovino across the ocean. His family, to say the least, was not supportive. Though it had been some of the hardest times of his life, he didn't regret any of it.

"No puedo estar sin ti
Si tú no estás aquí me quema el aire
Si tú no estás aquí sabrás
Que dios no va a entender por que te vas
Si tu no estás aquí."

Antonio finished the song, finally letting his eyes fall close as he strummed the last chord. All was silent for a few fragile seconds before the audience burst out in applause. Antonio opened his eyes and bowed before handing the guitar back to its owner. He pushed his way through the crowd, looking for the only person he wanted to see at that moment.

Suddenly, Antonio felt a body crash into him and he struggled to stay standing. He felt a fist hit him lightly in the chest, but there was no force behind it.

“Idiot.”

Lovino threw his arms around him, wiping at his eyes with a shaky hand. There were tear-tracks down his cheeks, a defined blush coloring every inch of his face.

“Lovi! Are you alright?” Antonio asked, but he knew that Lovino was more embarrassed than upset.

Lovino sniffled, but pulled sharply away with his hands on his hips, “I’m fine, bastard.”

Antonio smiled softly at the action.

Some things never change.

He took Lovino’s hands in his own,, “Do you remember the first time I sang that to you?”

Lovino laughed, “How could I forget? Your dumb ass was so nervous, I remember your voice cracking at the end of every line.”

Antonio cringed at the memory, but felt warm nonetheless, “I remember a certain someone also acting quite nervous. You were so shy back then, Lovi. It was so cute!”

Lovino punched him again, a little more forceful this time, “Shut up, bastard.”

You’re still so shy, and it’s still adorable! Antonio wanted to say, but he knew that he’d get hit for real if he said that. Instead he gathered Lovino into his chest and planted a sloppy kiss to his forehead, “I love you, *tesoro.*”

Lovino looked down, still aware of the sizable crowd around them. However, he must have realized that he really didn’t give a fuck, because he was suddenly crashing his lips to Antonio’s.

Antonio squeaked in surprise, gripping Lovino’s shoulders as they kissed. It wasn’t nearly as innocent as their previous ones had been, and he was only slightly shocked when he felt a tongue swipe teasingly across his bottom lip.

Lovino pulled away with a smirk, “I love you too, bastard.” He reached down and joined their hands looking far too self-satisfied at his boyfriend’s dazed look, “Now, let’s go home.”

Antonio could only nod along dumbly as he was pulled down the street and back towards their apartment. He only vaguely recalled the guitarist thanking him for drawing in such a crowd before he was out of earshot.

Their little date had been a welcome reprieve to their stressful lives. He knew that Lovino had to go to work in a few hours, and that he would be left alone in their dark little apartment. But right now he could watch the world melt away around him because he was with the love of his life, and nothing seemed to matter so long as they were together.

Chapter End Notes

Woo, y'all are getting spoiled for real today ;)

Also, is my gay ass projecting on these characters? Most definitely. For real, somebody needs to wife me immediately.

Anyways, thank you for reading, and I hope this lived up to the hype. I was so excited to write this because it's soft and nice and nothing hurts and omfg I'm a sucker for fluff like this. I hope you enjoyed everyone's little story, I had a blast writing it.

The song Antonio sings is "Si tu no estas aqui" by Rosana. It's beautiful, I hope y'all look up the song and translation!

Let me know if you liked this! This is totally different than everything else in the story, and really has no relevance beyond me wanting to write something fluffy and to follow up on some other mini plot ideas I introduced earlier.

I'm still pretty damn sick, these spots on my skin are getting worse and some of them are growing (oof, not good). In any case, I am still writing as much as I can in the limited time I am allowed, so please let me know if my writing gets choppy as a result.

Bless y'all, and welcome to 2020.

'Till next time!

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio's head snapped up at the sound of their apartment door creaking open, relaxing when it registered that it was only Lovino returning back from walking his brother to school. He slipped off his shoes and trudged into the kitchen where Antonio was pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"Welcome back!" Antonio chirped happily.

Lovino looked up, but didn't say anything. Instead, he shuffled even closer and snatched the mug of coffee right out of Antonio's hands with a mumbled, "It's too early for this shit."

"Hey, that's mine!" Antonio protested. He watched as Lovino took a deliberately long drink of *his* coffee, never breaking eye contact.

Pout already firmly in place, Antonio reached over to try and reclaim the precious drink, but Lovino simply took a step back with a little smirk on his face. They continued their little dance around the small kitchen, Antonio growing increasingly frustrated while Lovino dipped away, staying infuriatingly out of reach.

Deciding that this was going nowhere, Antonio halted in his pursuit with a huff. He crossed his arms, that pout becoming more pronounced.

"What's wrong, giving up already?" Lovino taunted.

"Keep it, I'll get a new mug." he whined.

Antonio eyed his boyfriend out of the corner of his eye, making a show of moving to the cabinet directly to the right of him, reaching up slowly. Suddenly, he whipped his hand down and swiped the cup of coffee right from Lovino's unsuspecting hands.

"Hey, bastard! Give that back!" Lovino reached to get the mug back.

Antonio simply lifted it over his head, "Nope, get your own!" he said smugly, watching in amusement as Lovino's short stature sabotaged his attempts to steal the coffee back.

With a huff, he crossed his arms and glared. "Ugh, fine. I didn't want your stupid coffee anyway." Lovino grumbled as he turned and aggressively slammed the cabinet open.

Antonio laughed and reached over his boyfriend's head to grab a new mug off one of the higher shelves, "Need some help?"

Lovino ground his teeth, "Fuck off."

Antonio ignored him in favor of handing him the mug, watching in amusement as he slammed it on the countertop.

Really, he'd be content to keep teasing the irate Italian for his predictably grouchy mood, but then Antonio noticed the way Lovino's hands shook. It was imperceptible, barely noticeable, but definitely there. He sighed, most of his teasing mood fading entirely.

Looks like he didn't sleep last night.

Over the many years they've known each other, Antonio had grown quite adept at recognizing certain telltale signs about Lovino's mental and physical state. Like now for example, he was clearly exhausted. Like most people, he became lethargic, unfocused, and was generally less creative with his insults. But his hands were always the giveaway — the shaking a blatant sign of his alarming state of fatigue.

Now aware of this fact, Antonio steeled himself before abruptly swiping the newly made cup of coffee from the counter before Lovino could pick it up. His eyes snapped up at the action, his body tensing as he glowered at Antonio like he just committed some terrible atrocity.

I mean, I guess I sort of did in his eyes.

Predictably, he exploded, "What the fuck are you doing, bastard! Stealing one cup of coffee wasn't enough for you?!"

Antonio was unable to hold back his laughter at the comment, once again holding the cup high above his head as Lovino reached for it, "First of all, you're the one that stole *my* cup of coffee in the first place. Second, you don't need caffeine, you need sleep."

Lovino continued to reach desperately, "I don't need to sleep, that's what the coffee is for, idiot!"

Antonio snorted before he spun on his heel and poured the drink into the sink in one swift movement. Lovino stared in muted horror at the action, his face slowly darkening.

The kitchen was silent for approximately two seconds — Antonio relished the peace while it lasted.

"Are you *trying* to pick a fight with me? Because you're doing a damn good job at it! Seriously, why in the hell would you do that?!" Lovino screeched, his voice steadily rising in pitch as his tirade continued, "Aren't you supposed to be going to work, soon? Why don't you just go already and leave me and my coffee in peace!"

Oh dear, it seems I overdid it a bit.

Antonio fought the grin that wanted to take over his face. Lovino got unnecessarily protective over his coffee, and he found it incredibly endearing (if not just the slightest bit annoying how he seemed to put coffee over Antonio himself on occasion).

Lovino continued to rant, his face growing hot as a defined dusting of red colored his cheeks. He still hadn't completely recovered from the cold he'd come down with after running

through the rain last week, and Antonio was getting a little concerned with how much this rant seemed to be wearing him down. He looked up when Lovino stomped a foot childishly on the ground, realizing that he must have tuned out most of what he was saying.

“Calm down, Lovi. I did it because you need to get some rest before work.” Antonio placated softly.

“Christ, don’t you think I know that?! I don’t go to work for another eight fucking hours, that’s plenty of time!” Lovino seethed, fists clenched tightly at his sides.

Antonio wasn’t convinced, “Then why do you need the caffeine if you’re just going to sleep anyway?”

“Bastard, that’s not the point.” Lovino crossed his arms.

Antonio sighed once again before setting his own cup of coffee off to the side. Lovino eyed it like he might just swipe it, but Antonio was faster. He stepped in front of the counter and began herding his obstinate boyfriend to the bedroom.

Always so stubborn. I guess I’ll have to make him get some rest! Antonio thought with conviction.

“Stop, I don’t need to sleep! I’ll take a nap later, just let me go!” Lovino tried to twist away, but Antonio blocked his escape as they made it into the hallway.

“Nope, you are going to go to bed right now. I want to be sure that you actually get some sleep before I leave.” Antonio said firmly.

Lovino scoffed, “Are you serious? I’m fine, stop worrying so much!”

Antonio gave him a dubious look, taking in the dark bags under his eyes, and how weak his attempts were to get away. He was slowly wasting away under the constant stress and pressure, and he didn’t even seem to recognize it. Antonio couldn’t stop worrying if he tried.

“Lovi, you’re not okay. Caffeine is not a substitute for sleep even if you think it is!” Antonio chided, finally pushing Lovino down onto the bed.

“I know it’s not! Listen, I would *love* to actually be able to sleep at night but I can’t, alright?” Lovino sulked, suddenly looking pained.

Antonio’s eyes widened in surprise, “What do you mean?”

Lovino groaned in frustration, “I don’t know! It’s like, I lay down and close my eyes, but my thoughts won’t stop. I *can’t* sleep, don’t you get it?”

He sounded desperate to be believed, and Antonio sat next to him on the bed with imploring eyes, “Lovi, how long has it been since you’ve slept?”

“I don’t know, maybe like a couple days? Sometimes I can sleep for a few hours during the day.” he growed, clearly still irritated.

A few days? He hasn't slept in that long?

"Why didn't you tell me?" Antonio asked softly.

Lovino shrugged, some of that previous anger dissipating, "It was worse when we lived in Italy, I thought I could handle it."

"It's been going on for this long?" Antonio asked, shocked that he never noticed.

Lovino shook his head, "It stopped when we moved in with Roma. It only started again a little while ago."

Antonio nodded mutely, trying to grapple with the fact that Lovino was an apparent insomniac and *I didn't even notice.*

"Listen, I'm fine. Just let me go drink my coffee." Lovino grumbled as he moved to get up.

"No, wait." Antonio said, placing a hand on his chest to halt the attempted escape. "I still want you to at least lay down for a while. Even if you can't sleep, you're still sick. Please, at least until it's time for me to go."

Lovino looked like he wanted to protest, but he eventually succumbed to Antonio's pleading eyes, "Ugh, fine."

With a relieved little smile, Antonio watched as Lovino moved to lay down properly on the bed. He glared a little, but couldn't suppress the small sigh of relief as his eyes drifted shut.

Antonio sat at the foot of the bed, waiting patiently for the moment that Lovino's expression would soften and he could *finally* allow himself to relax. It took some time, but eventually the tension did ebb away from his frame as his breathing evened out. Antonio couldn't tell if he'd fallen asleep or not, but he decided to slip out of the room so he wouldn't disturb him.

Sleep well, amor.

The door was closed with a soft *click.* Antonio padded silently back to the kitchen and downed the rest of the now-cold coffee. He still had around ten minutes before he needed to leave, so he made the swift decision to pick up the small mess they'd made.

He placed some dishes in the sink, wiping down the counters all while humming a cheerful little melody. He moved to the table, noticing that Lovino had left his phone. Antonio picked it up, intending to place it on the nightstand in their bedroom, when the screen lit up.

Antonio jumped in surprise despite the fact that his volume was off. There was no caller i.d., but he had a pretty good guess about who it was.

I should just ignore it. Antonio thought, finger hovering over the 'end call' button, but something stopped him. This was the man who was harassing *his Lovi.* Nobody had a right to do that, not when he could do something about it.

He knew he shouldn't. He *really* shouldn't. But Antonio was angry, and the more the phone rang, the more his patience seemed to run thin. So, before he could change his mind, he answered the phone, bringing it up to his ear without a word.

"So I'm finally graced with an answer. Wow, I feel *so* honored." answered a gravelly voice, a familiar accent coloring the words.

Antonio felt a searing rage pierce his gut, and he was unable to stop the dark growl at the tip of his tongue, "What the hell do you want?"

The line went silent for a heartbeat, presumably in surprise, before he could hear an amused chuckle, "Is that the little Spanish kid? Antonio, right?"

Antonio was just a little surprised that this man apparently remembered him, wondering if it was his accent that had given him away. Then again, he and Lovino had become inseparable in the year preceding their escape from Italy — which wasn't all that long ago in the grand scheme of things. His grip on the phone tightened, but Antonio held onto coherency as he growled, "I said, what the *hell* do you want?"

"It is, isn't it!" he chirped, still laughing heartily. "Well, Antonio, I'd like to talk to my son if you don't mind.'

The friendly tone was beginning to piss him off, and Antonio grit his teeth in annoyance, "Actually, I do mind. Why have you been harassing him?"

"I wouldn't say it's *harassment."*

"Like hell it is!" Antonio hissed. He wanted to yell the words, but he couldn't alert Lovino to this conversation.

"Were you always this angry? That won't be good…" he trailed off thoughtfully.

"What?" Antonio snapped.

"Oh, don't you worry about it." he said cheekily.

Antonio felt that white hot fury start to burn anew, "You listen to me, if you don't stop calling then I swear to God that-"

"Are you really making threats? Man, you're digging a hole here."

"Wha-"

"It was nice talking to you, Antonio. It's been too long, seriously we should catch up some time." he intoned cheerfully. "Give Feliciano my best. Oh, and tell Lovino that I'll see him soon."

"You stay away from both of them!" Antonio yelled into the phone, but the call had ended.

Son of a bitch!

Antonio was having a difficult time reigning in his anger, and he had the sudden urge to smash the phone against the walll. However, in an admirable display of self-control, he put it down roughly on the table.

What in the hell was that? This doesn't make sense!

He paced back and forth in the kitchen, trying to calm down. He didn't like the overly friendly tone of voice he'd been met with — it felt oddly menacing. Antonio may have been confused about the conversation he just had, but he knew that somehow he'd just been threatened.

But what did he mean! Antonio thought, gripping at his hair with his hands. He needed to talk to Lovino. He would be angry that he answered the phone, but that was the least of his worries at this point.

Antonio padded back to the bedroom, but froze when he saw Lovino was out like a light. A rare look of peace painted his face, the steady rhythm of his chest moving up and down making it clear that he was deeply asleep. After everything that he'd admitted just earlier that morning, Antonio realized that he couldn't wake him up.

He walked to the side of the bed, feeling tears sting the back of his eyes. It felt like the family they had created for themselves was about to come crumbling down, and there wasn't a thing he could do to stop it.

Antonio knelt next to the bed, reaching a shaky hand out to rest on Lovino's forehead. It was warm, but not feverish — a small blessing, but he was grateful for it nonetheless. While it hadn't been more than a cold and had hardly phased him, Antonio couldn't help but worry.

'Tell Lovino that I'll see him soon.'

He shook his head, trying to expel that flippant voice from his head. He needed to tell Lovino about this, but he just couldn't bring himself to shake him awake.

I'll have to call him when I'm on break.

With a sigh, Antonio stood. He was already running late for work, and he really couldn't afford to stall any longer. He realized that they were going to have to tell Feliciano what was happening, too. He dreaded it, knowing how badly it was going to affect the teen.

With one more lingering look on Lovino's slumbering form, Antonio exited the room. He slipped on his shoes and jogged out of the apartment, fighting tears the entire way.

Chapter End Notes

Hey y'all, I promise I'm alive lol. Also, is that some plot I see?!

So I'm finally feeling better, even if I still have spots all over my skin. Anyways, I'm back at it and ready to get this thing moving!

Thank you all so much for reading, let me know what you think. Our antagonist finally makes an appearance! Even if he doesn't really appear... Oh well, it's good enough for me! Also, did you know that you can actually develop insomnia when you're like super stressed out?

I'm excited to be back, and I have a rough outline written down so get hype. As always, bless all of y'all and thanks for sticking around!

'Till next time!

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Hey y'all, it's in the tags, but I want to mention it (and this goes for the rest of the story): There are some descriptions and talk about abuse. It's not super graphic, but please be aware. Thanks!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ludwig was worried.

He was sitting at lunch, not quite sure how to bring up his concerns without coming across as overbearing. Feliciano sat off to the side talking animatedly with Kiku. The quiet boy simply nodded along to the rapid speech, but did seem truly invested in the conversation. Ludwig wasn't exactly sure what Feliciano was talking about, he was far too occupied trying to figure out what to do.

"That's so cute! Where'd you get it?" Feliciano trilled excitedly, some of the conversation filtering through to Ludwig.

"Oh, thank you." Kiku mumbled sheepishly. Ludwig looked and saw what Feliciano was gushing over — a little keychain that attached to Kiku's phone. It was shaped like a cat, and Kiku looked at it fondly before saying, "A friend gave it to me."

Feliciano hummed in delight, asking to see it, and a red-faced Kiku handed it over. Feliciano continued to coo at the apparent cuteness of the keychain as Ludwig's thoughts turned inward once more.

He gets so defensive, I don't want to make him angry. After all, he could have a perfectly valid excuse… But what if he doesn't? What if something's wrong?

Ludwig battled internally with himself, trying to think things through. Feliciano was acting like his normal bubbly self, behaving for all intents and purposes like the happy teenager that he apparently was. Still, Ludwig couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Yes, Feliciano was acting like normal, but that was precisely the problem. He was worried because, just like *normal,* Feliciano wasn't eating.

He hadn't noticed until Kiku brought it up a week or so ago. Since then, he'd been keeping a close eye on the excitable teen. He'd noticed that, without fail, Feliciano would eat only a few chips, or a bite or two of his sandwich before carefully packing it away. He was surprisingly subtle, spacing out the times when he took a bite to give off the impression that he'd been eating the entire time.

He's getting skinnier, too. Ludwig noticed, apprehension picking at his insides.

While Feliciano had always been rather scrawny, he had at least looked healthy. But that was starting to change, and now that Ludwig was aware of his rather sketchy eating habits, he could see how much his frame had thinned out. He didn't look blatantly unhealthy, but the fact that the difference was noticeable did not bode well with Ludwig.

Knowing the response he was most likely going to receive, Ludwig turned to Feliciano during a lull in his conversation with Kiku, "Are you not hungry?"

Feliciano looked up and smiled brightly, "I actually ate a lot this morning, so I'm good!"

Ludwig nodded mutely, fully expecting that answer. However, he didn't trust that smile for an instant.

The lunch period drew to a close, and Ludwig stood without a word. While it was quickly growing commonplace, Feliciano still surprised him with a short hug before he bounded energetically out of the cafeteria. Ludwig sighed as he watched him go, wondering how (if at all) he should address the situation.

Maybe Gil has some advice…

Lost in thought as he was, Ludwig didn't notice when Kiku stepped up next to him, "You noticed as well?"

Ludwig peered down in surprise, "I'm sorry?"

Kiku met his eyes with a steady gaze, "He is not looking well, I am worried too."

Ludwig nodded solemnly, "What do we do?"

Kiku pursed his lips in thought, mulling things over. He finally turned back to Ludwig with a troubled expression, "Be here for him, maybe he will come to us."

With those short words, he walked away, leaving a pensive Ludwig in his wake. He was not satisfied with Kiku's answer in the least bit. If anything, he was growing increasingly irritated — whether that irritation was at Feliciano for hiding something from them, or Ludwig's own inability to help, he couldn't be sure.

He hated to be kept in the dark, and the worry he felt was uncomfortable. Ludwig nodded sharply to himself, deciding that he was going to get answers — and he was going to do it his way.

As he walked back to class, Ludwig mentally developed a foolproof three-step process that was sure to get answers.

<u>Step One: Observation</u>

Ludwig was pleased to note that his plan had already been in action without him consciously aware of it. He had been observing Feliciano for a while now, so he already had some solid data.

Observation #1: He never eats more than half his lunch.
Observation #2: He always packs his leftovers, like he's saving them for later.
Observation #3: He uses the same excuse of 'eating a large breakfast' every time.
Observation #4: He is skinny, uncomfortably so, and it's getting worse.

Ludwig tapped his pencil against his cheek, trying to think of anything else he had noticed. He had a decent list already formed, but he needed to gather more information.

The sound of the bell shocked Ludwig out of his thought process, and it was with a little smirk that he quickly stood and shot out of the room. His next period was p.e., the perfect opportunity to compile more observations.

Absently, Ludwig wondered if treating Feliciano like an experiment was wrong — after all, he could simply ask the teen outright what was wrong. That would be the more adult thing to do, but Ludwig had already tried to confront him with little success.

This way is more efficient, especially since Feliciano is being obstinate.

Pleased with his logic, Ludwig continued his swift march down the hallway towards the gym.

As always, Ludwig was the first to arrive in the locker room, and he was quick to change. He would typically stand in the gym and wait for Feliciano after he changed, but just as he was about to exit, he realized that this was the perfect opportunity to see if his worries were warranted.

He knew where Feliciano's locker was, so he walked swiftly over and pushed himself against a wall. Ludwig waited patiently, and was finally rewarded when he saw Feliciano bounce to his locker without noticing the tall blond.

He started peeling off his shirt, and for the first time, Ludwig realized how weird this was. He blushed when it dawned on him that he'd never seen Feliciano shirtless before, the thought making him feel all different kinds of bashful.

We're both guys, this isn't weird! Ludwig tried to convince himself, though that didn't make his face any less red. Maybe it was because he knew that what he was doing was objectively creepy, or maybe it was because he and Feliciano were dating.

In a dark part of his mind, Ludwig could hear Lovino's voice: *"If you do anything that makes him even remotely uncomfortable, I. will. end. you. Got it?"*

Ludwig shuddered, forcibly banishing those thoughts to focus back on the task at hand. He tried not to avert his eyes when Feliciano pulled the shirt the rest of his way off. He turned to put the discarded article of clothing in the locker, and Ludwig had to muffle a gasp of surprise.

Feliciano was painfully thin, his ribs forming defined valleys on his pale skin. He wasn't necessarily emaciated, but he was skinny for Ludwig to feel justified in his weird kind-of stalking.

Shaking his head to himself in disbelief, Ludwig squinted in concentration when he noticed something even more alarming: there were strange, circular scars marring the backs of his arms. Not only that, but he had a long scar running from just above his hip to the center of his back. Even from his spot a ways off, Ludwig could tell that it was old. It looked like it had been a painful gash at one point, the skin discoloured and raised angrily.

Mein Gott, what could have caused that?

It was shocking to say the least, and Ludwig found that he couldn't tear his eyes away until Feliciano slipped on his gym shirt.

Ludwig decided he was done *observing* for the time being, exiting the locker room to stand in a disturbed stupor in the gym. He couldn't help but feel like he'd just witnessed something personal — even if it was clear that Feliciano was comfortable enough to change in front of other people.

His hands itched to write some of these observations down in his notebook, but that wasn't a possibility right now. Instead, he scowled fiercely at the ground as his concern for Feliciano only grew. This had started off as a way for Ludwig to uncover why he refused to eat, but it was quickly evolving into something more.

"Hey, Ludwig!" Feliciano chirped happily, jogging up to him with a bright smile.

Ludwig, now knowing what those baggy clothes covered up, could only grunt lightly in acknowledgement.

Feliciano seemed a little disheartened by the lack of response, his smile fading as he picked loosely at his nails. "Sorry, was I being loud again?"

Ludwig instantly felt remorse for putting a damper on that warm smile, "Sorry, you're fine. I was just thinking about something.

The response seemed to mollify him, "Okay, good! But what are you thinking about? That's not a very happy face."

"This is just my face." Ludwig deadpanned.

Feliciano chuckled loudly in response, "No, silly! You were looking at the ground like it ate the rest of your pasta."

"Oh. I just… have a lot of homework to do this weekend." Ludwig lied weakly.

"Ugh, me too. Hey, we could work on it together! I work on Saturday, but I'm free right after?" Feliciano looked up, clearly asking for permission.

Ludwig nodded with a genuine smile. Despite how weird (read: worried) he felt at the moment, he still craved Feliciano's company. His personality was infectious, and he would take any excuse to spend some alone time with him, "*Ja,* that sounds nice. I can pick you up from the library if you'd like."

Feliciano nodded his head excitedly. With that settled, they waited for the class to start. They played dodgeball, and if Ludwig was acting just a little more protective over Feliciano than usual, then nobody questioned it.

Ludwig walked home slowly, head buried in his notebook the entire way. He had compiled a few more observations, including the strange scars he had seen on Feliciano's body. He was growing frustrated with himself, wondering if he was being too nosy.

This is getting too personal, I should really just talk to him.

Even though Ludwig knew that that was the responsible thing to do, he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. And besides, he had already started his three-step process. In fact, it was time for him to initiate the second stage.

Step 2: Research

Ludwig padded silently into his apartment, fully expecting the usual obnoxious screaming from his brother. But, to his surprise (and relief), he was greeted by cool silence. He looked curiously to the table, noting that the characteristic spread of official documents and reports there that indicated that Gilbert was indeed in the apartment. His brother worked in an office downtown, but he much preferred to work from home when it was allowed.

Relishing the rare silence of the apartment, Ludwig promptly marched to his room to retrieve his laptop. As he passed the bathroom, he could hear the water running. Now satisfied that he knew the whereabouts of his brother, Ludwig returned to the living room and sat heavily on the couch. He turned on his laptop, staring blankly at the screen as he contemplated what he should type in the search-bar.

I'm not even sure what I'm trying to find out anymore… Maybe I can start with the lack of eating.

Ludwig pulled out his notebook as he searched for reasons why someone may stop eating. He got many answers that he expected — links about eating disorders and whatnot. He also got a surprising amount of information regarding hospice care. Those points made him uncomfortable, the inevitable descent into death apparently caused a drastic loss of appetite.

Since Feliciano was not dying (or at least, he sure hoped he wasn't), Ludwig sat back on the couch and contemplated his next move. He had jotted down some notes about the eating disorders, although he still felt like he was missing something. The results on the computer were getting repetitive, so he sat back with a groan of frustration.

Why would he refuse to eat and then lie about it? It doesn't make sense…

At a loss, Ludwig stared blankly at his computer screen. A morbid part of him started thinking about the scars that Feliciano had on his back and arms. He decided to type in a description of what they looked like, starting with the strange circular ones on the back of his arms.

Ludwig scrolled through some rather grotesque injuries until he found a picture that looked similar to what he had seen on Feliciano. He clicked on it, only to stare in muted horror.

Cigarette burns?

He squinted at his computer, hoping he was reading the words wrong. He rubbed at his eyes and read the description again. Unfortunately, Ludwig didn't suddenly develop a case of dyslexia as the words remained the same. He sat back, not even able to pick up his notebook to record his findings.

Ludwig sat in denial for a long time — maybe the burns weren't caused by a cigarette. And even if they were, then it had to be an accident, right?

But no, there were clusters of those scars on his arms. The circular shape of the marks were far too similar to the pictures he was looking at, eliminating any chance that they were caused by anything else. They looked far too intentional, and the sheer number of them indicated that it wasn't some freak accident either.

The denial was wearing off, and all Ludwig could feel was *anger*. He couldn't fathom how such violence could be committed against such an innocent person. Feliciano was so sweet, and Ludwig doubted he had a malicious bone in his body. He couldn't rationalize it, that intense anger laced with a profound sadness.

As Ludwig sat listlessly on the couch, his eyes betraying his every-growing wrath, Gilbert shuffled silently into the kitchen. He didn't announce himself in dramatic fashion as he normally might have. His hair was still dripping water onto his t-shirt, his slow movements revealing just how drained he was. His eyes, while not dull, did not hold that normal gleam of mischief.

If Ludwig had been in the right state of mind, he would have commented on his brother's odd countenance. As it was, however, he could only stare past his computer screen as he slowly realized the implications of his findings.

Gilbert, finally noticing his brother on the couch, approached him cautiously. He observed him for a moment, padding closer before poking the blond at his cheek, "*Hallo?* Earth to Ludwig, are you okay?"

Ludwig snapped out of the dazed trance he'd been trapped in, his hands balling into fists as his heart rate doubled. He didn't respond to the obnoxious prodding, instead opting to silently seethe on the couch as he tried to calm himself down.

I'll kill them. Whoever put those scars on his body, I'll kill them.

Gilbert must have felt the murderous intent, his brow furrowing in concern, "Hey, are you alright? What are you looking… at." he froze as he craned his neck to look at the computer screen.

Ludwig snapped the screen of his laptop shut, sick of staring at the horrible scarring.

His brother jumped in surprise, his voice taking on an uncharacteristically serious tone, “Why were you looking at that kind of stuff?”

“Our father… let’s just say that he wasn’t the nicest man to be around.” is what Feliciano had said, a few puzzle pieces sliding together neatly in his head.

This is what he meant.

Ludwig fought to hold onto composure, but it was a losing battle. He launched himself off the couch, forcing his brother to jump out of the way. He began to pace in the living room, growling aggressively as he tried not to lash out at anything breakable.

The anxiety, his overprotective brother, why they left Italy, those awful scars. It all makes sense now.

Gilbert waved his arms, trying to grab the fuming blond’s attention, “Hey! What the hell is wrong with you?”

Ludwig didn’t spare even a fleeting glance at his brother, too lost in his own rage.

With a glare, Gilbert stepped directly in his path, “Listen, I’m talking to you, *arschloch!”*

Instead of pushing past the albino, Ludwig clapped his hands tightly over his shoulders, forcing their eyes to meet as he grit out, “Why?”

“Eh?” Gilbert asked, wincing when the grip on his shoulders became painfully tight.

“Why would someone do something so horrible?” Ludwig gestured wildly with one hand at his laptop.

“You’re gonna have to be a little more specific.” was the confused response.

Ludwig suddenly released his grip, backing away. He stared down at his hands, wondering if they could ever commit something so cruel.

Not to Feliciano. Never to him.

He saw a drop of water land on one of his hands. Then another one. Another. It wasn’t long until the water was pooling in his hands as tears cascaded down his cheeks. He clenched his hands into fists and stumbled back until he sat heavily on the couch, burying his face in his hands.

Why him? I don’t understand, how did he deserve something like that?

Gilbert sat down gingerly beside him, awkwardly patting him on the shoulder. “Okay, I’m seriously worried now. What happened?”

Ludwig took in a shaky breath, “I think… I think I saw something that I shouldn’t have.”

I should have spoken to him. I wanted to figure out what was wrong, but not like this…

He felt an overbearing sense of guilt for his actions. He'd betrayed Feliciano's privacy, digging into his past where he was obviously not wanted — there was a reason the fidgety teen danced around his upbringing. Maybe one day Feliciano would have trusted Ludwig enough to talk to him, *like an adult,* but Ludwig had taken that from him. Although he didn't know the full story or what his life was really like before he left Italy, it was evident now that he'd been in a dark place.

And there was that longer scar, the one on his back.

Ludwig paled at the memory. Cigarette burns were bad enough, but he was terrified to find out where the gash had come from.

"Does this have something to do with those pictures on your computer?" Gilbert prodded, voice deathly serious.

Ludwig nodded mutely, feeling those few fleeting tears come to a stop. His brother sighed, dragging a heavy hand down over his face.

The living room grew silent, but Ludwig's mind was on fire. He was ashamed to admit that he wanted to know more. Now that he had an inkling of Feliciano's past, he wanted to know exactly what had happened — how he came to live with his grandfather, when he left Italy, *is he okay?* — but he felt like he'd lost the right to ask.

Leaning back to stare listlessly at the ceiling above, Ludwig breathed out imploringly, "Why would somebody do something like that, especially to their own kids?"

Gilbert leaned back next to him with another sigh, finding his own point on the ceiling to stare at, "I don't know, but I know how you feel. I met the sweetest boy today, his name was Peter."

Ludwig nodded along, wondering if he was about to find out the reason why his brother was so withdrawn that evening.

After a shuddering intake of breath, Gilbert continued, "That kid is a ball of motherfucking sunshine, and nobody can ever convince me otherwise." he said with conviction, now glaring upwards. "His teacher is the one that told us about how skinny he was, how he couldn't stay awake in class. There was some nasty bruising on the back of his arms, there wasn't even an attempt to hide it." He had to take in a deep breath, obviously torn up about the story.

Ludwig waited patiently, knowing that his brother tended to get emotional when he talked about some of his cases. Gilbert was too kind for social work, no matter how much he denied it. He got too attached, and took things personally when he was unable to help one of his kids.

"Eleven years old." Gilbert suddenly spat. "He was *eleven.* They starved him and fucking beat him."

Ludwig closed his eyes, feeling a pain in his chest, "Why?"

Gilbert laughed without a trace of humor, “Why? Because they’re disgusting, awful people. Not everyone needs a sob story to explain their actions. Some people are cruel just for the sake of being cruel.”

The living room descended into viscous silence at the words. Gilbert had been through a lot as a result of his job, and Ludwig felt a rare moment of sympathy for his brother. He’d seen the worst of humanity, things that would harden even the kindest of people. But he was able to stay positive, his obnoxious attitude compensating for the horrors he was forced to deal with. After all, there was a reason he spent most of his free time frequenting the local bars.

Ludwig rubbed tiredly at his eyes, trying to erase all evidence of the brief moment of distress. He’d shown more emotion in one evening than he had in maybe the last year.

Gilbert noticed the action, sitting up to clap a comforting hand on his shoulder, “Whatever you saw today, I’m guessing it has something to do with Feliciano?”

Ludwig’s eyes snapped up in shock, “*Ja,* how did you know?”

“The only things I’ve ever seen you show this much emotion over are cute dogs and Feliciano. You can’t get anything past your awesome brother!” Gilbert tried to sound like his normal self, but it came out forced.

Ludwig nodded, a little embarrassed that his affections were so obviously read

Gilbert let his fake smile fall, suddenly serious once more, “Is he alright? Do you need me to get involved?”

Ludwig shook his head, “No, they were old scars. I just wished I could have helped him.”

“Don’t we all.” Gilbert chuckled darkly. “Listen, here’s something I picked up in my line of work: stop thinking so much. You can’t change what happened in the past, but you can change the future, hopefully for the better.”

With those final words, he stood and walked away. Ludwig was left to contemplate his brother’s advice alone, but just as Gilbert turned into the hallway, he felt compelled to ask, “What’s going to happen to Peter?”

Gilbert stopped, turning to look over his shoulder, “He’ll go into foster care. There’s too much evidence against his parents, they’re looking at prison time. Why?”

Ludwig shrugged, not knowing exactly why he felt invested in Peter’s fate. He heard his brother sigh before turning into his room, shutting the door with a soft *click.* Ludwig scooped up his notebook, flipping idly through all the data he’d compiled.

<u>Step 3: Analysis</u>

He jotted down some more notes, although Ludwig left out his suspicions as to who was responsible for the abuse.

Abuse.

That was the first time he dared think the word. That's what it was though, that's what Feliciano had lived through. While Ludwig didn't have anything beyond his own speculation, he'd picked up enough from his brother to recognize the signs.

Those scars were pretty damning, and Feliciano himself had alluded to a less than happy family life in the past. Not to mention the anxiety, all the imperceptible little flinches when someone moved too quickly or when a room grew too loud. There was Lovino, too — *No wonder he was so protective, it all makes sense now.*

Ludwig sighed, tossing his notebook on top of the scattered documents on the table. He never did find out why Feliciano refused to eat — no, what he found was much worse.

The guilt he felt was still present, but it was less potent than before. While Ludwig recognized that he'd done little more than draw a logical conclusion from the information presented to him, he still pried into Feliciano's personal life. He'd gone out of his way to observe him, and then dig deeper once he got home.

With a sigh, Ludwig turned and retreated to his bedroom. He resolved himself not to treat Feliciano any differently, nor would he let on what he knew. He would wait until Feliciano trusted him enough to share the information freely — if and when that happened. Besides, he was clearly out of harm's way. Ludwig couldn't imagine Lovino (or Antonio for that matter) hurting Feliciano in any way. He would be safe with them.

Ludwig thought that whoever put those scars on Feliciano's skin better stay far, *far* away. He couldn't change what happened in the past, but like Gilbert said, he could help change his future for the better. Ludwig felt resolve at the thought, promising himself that he wouldn't allow any harm to befall the cheerful little Italian.

Never again.

Chapter End Notes

Man, I stayed up way too late to finish this. I was on a freaking roll and I didn't want to stop, oops.

Anyways, thank you for reading! There have been allusions, but this is the first time I've blatantly indicated that there was abuse. I'm in no way trying to glorify it, but it is integral to the story and plot. If you feel uncomfortable with it, then I strongly suggest you stop reading. Like I said, it's not going to get super graphic, and I am trying to handle it with grace and tact. Let me know if I am ever insensitive or incorrect in my descriptions, I am trying to make this as realistic as possible.

I only said one new thing today:

Arschloch: asshole

I appreciate y'all for sticking around. This story has been a roller coaster, huh? But it's about time Ludwig put two and two together, he is a smart cookie.

We are going to be getting into the meat of the plot very soon, so cheers to that lads.

Thanks again!

'Till next time.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano reached on his tiptoes, straining to reach the top shelf. He had his tongue out in concentration as he attempted to push the book into its designated spot, but was irritated to find that he just couldn't reach. With a sigh, he lowered himself back down to the floor and pouted. Feliciano loved working in the library. It was easy, quiet, and he was mostly left on his own. Really, the job would be perfect if he could *just reach the top shelf!*

Just as Feliciano was contemplating physically climbing the shelf, a meek voice cut through the silence, "Um, do you need help?"

Feliciano jumped in surprise, not expecting the interruption. He whipped around, but relaxed when he saw who it was, "Oh, hi Matthew! What are you doing here?"

Matthew stood a little ways off, eyes sparkling in amusement as he watched Feliciano struggle, "I'm writing an essay and needed somewhere quiet to work."

"Oh, gotcha! Is Alfred here too?" Feliciano asked, craning his neck as if he expected the other twin to suddenly materialize.

Matthew huffed, "He's the reason I need a quiet place to work."

Feliciano laughed into his hand. He had missed Matthew's quiet sass, and was ashamed to say that he had been neglecting his friendship with the two brothers. He still talked to them in class, but that was typically the extent of the interaction he had with them, "Well you chose a good place! As long as you stay upstairs, the first floor can get really noisy."

Matthew hummed in agreement, "Yeah, I agree. Are you working on homework, too?"

Feliciano shook his head, "Actually, I work here. That's why I'm trying to put this book away, but I can't reach." He glared at the top shelf like it had personally affronted him. He once again tried to think of ways to reach it (some of his ideas including an embarrassing amount of jumping), when Matthew stepped closer.

"Here, I think I can help," he held his hand out in a quiet request for the book. For the first time, Feliciano noticed that Matthew was *tall.* He had to be the same height as Alfred, who also stood at least a full head taller than Feliciano himself.

Huh, I never noticed before.

Feliciano handed the book over silently and watched with slight envy as Matthew simply reached up and slid the book back in place. Despite mentally cursing his short stature, he still managed a bright, "Thank you!"

Matthew smiled, "No problem."

Feliciano, suddenly remembering his job, noticed that Matthew was scanning the titles of the surrounding books, “Is there anything you need help finding?”

“Um, yes actually. Do you have any books on polar bears?” he asked sheepishly.

Feliciano brought his thumb and forefinger to his chin, “Hmm, I know we have something somewhere.” He thought about where he had seen the books about animals, suddenly perking up in memory, “That’s right, follow me!”

They walked through the small maze of shelves, Feliciano leading the way. He hadn’t been working there for long, only two weeks, but he was already pretty familiar with the layout of the floor. He distinctly remembered putting a book away with a bear on the cover, and turned on his heel down one of the columns.

Matthew followed as Feliciano started muttering to himself. Finally, he bent down and grabbed a book, presenting it to Matthew with a proud little smile, “Does this work?”

Matthew flipped through the pages, eyes scanning through some of the text. The book that Feliciano managed to find was all about arctic wildlife, and had a sizable section on polar bears. After a few more seconds, Matthew closed the book and smiled, “Yes, this is perfect. Thank you very much.”

“No problem! Let me know if you need help finding anything else.” Feliciano said happily.

Matthew nodded his head in appreciation, turning to make his way back to the table he had been working at.

Feliciano sighed contentedly as he was left alone once more, feeling at ease in the quiet space. He was finished shelving books, but he still had an hour left of his shift. He’d brought his backpack with his homework in it, and usually he would sit at the front desk and work on it until he was directed to do something else. But Ludwig was picking him up at six, and they planned on working on homework together.

Maybe I could clean a little. He thought as he noticed some dust on some of the shelves. Without another thought, he retrieved a feather duster from the front desk and got to work.

He hummed softly to himself as he cleaned, dusting off maybe three shelves when his skin started to crawl. Feliciano shuddered, pausing in his actions as he tried to identify the sensation. He glanced behind him, trying to pinpoint the source of the feeling, but his gaze was met with empty tables and deserted desks. Saturdays were fairly slow, and apart from the few responsible students like Matthew, the library was pretty devoid of anybody.

Feliciano shook his head and returned to his cleaning. Some of the dust that he had disturbed with the duster floated down and caused him to sneeze. He thought absently that maybe it was the dust particles that were causing the strange feeling…

But no, there it was again!

Feliciano spun on his heel, finally identifying what he was feeling.

Someone's watching me.

A shiver ran up his spine, trying with all his might to ignore the uncomfortable sensation. He thought that he was imagining it, or maybe it was just his anxiety that always bubbled just beneath the skin. He felt exposed in the open, so Feliciano decided to weave his way even further into the labyrinth of shelves, hoping to escape the eyes — imaginary or not — that followed him.

He finally halted in his retreat when he found a more secluded portion of the room. Once more, he wondered if he'd just been imagining things. It was like something had triggered a sixth sense in him, imbuing in him an inkling of foreboding that latched onto him.

Realizing that he could do literally nothing about the uncomfortable feeling, Feliciano suppressed another shudder and got back to his cleaning.

A short while later, he found himself kneeling down trying to put some books in the correct order. He muttered under his breath, irritated how people just threw things on the shelf, paying no heed to the fact that *they go in a particular order!*

Feliciano's head was bent down, and he was completely focused on the task at hand. As a result, he didn't hear the footsteps that approached him. A figure appeared before him, and Feliciano had to muffle the subsequent yelp of surprise when someone cleared their throat.

Once again, Feliciano whipped around to see who had disturbed his irritated muttering. He saw a flash of blond hair and blue eyes, relaxing when he recognized who it was, "Ludwig! *Dio mio,* don't scare me like that!" he said, a hand on his chest as he tried to slow his breathing. He let himself fall back so he was sitting fully on the ground.

"Sorry, I didn't think that would scare you." Ludwig mumbled sheepishly..

Feliciano shook his head, taking a calming breath as he pushed on a bright smile, "That's alright! Is it six already?"

Ludwig pulled out his phone and checked the time, "No, you still have a few minutes."

Feliciano nodded, casting a critical eye over the shelf that he had just fixed before determining that it was acceptable. He turned to peer at Ludwig and reached his hands up with little grabby motions.

Ludwig sighed, but reached down to pull him up.

"Thanks!" Feliciano chirped, picking up the feather duster as he motioned for Ludwig to follow him.

They made their way out of the isolated corner Feliciano had nestled himself in. They were back in the open, and he suddenly remembered why he'd retreated in the first place. Feliciano carefully scanned the room, noting that Matthew must have left.

Weird, the feeling's gone. Maybe I really was just imagining things.

“What are you doing?”

Feliciano jumped yet again at the voice. He felt his cheeks heat up when he realized how strange he must have looked standing in the middle of the library, scanning for something that didn’t even exist. He brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck, “Nothing?”

Ludwig huffed, but let it go.

They walked to the front desk so Feliciano could gather his things. He only had five or so minutes left, so he pulled his phone out and checked for notifications. He only had one text from Lovino, making sure he was going to Ludwig’s after work. He was typing back a confirmation when he heard somebody approach the desk.

“Ah, Feliciano, I’m glad I caught you!” Roderich said as he stopped in front of him. “Here,” he said, handing Feliciano what looked to be an envelope, “In the future, you can find this in the desk drawer in the staff room every other Friday.”

“Thank you!” Feliciano smiled brightly. Roderich nodded sternly, and spun on his heel to find something to fuss over.

“What’s that?” Ludwig asked curiously.

“I’m not sure,” Feliciano said, though he had a sneaking suspicion. He opened the envelope and found that his assumption was correct, “Oh, it’s a paycheck!” Feliciano looked at the amount, noting that it was just over two-hundred dollars.

Finally, I’m helping! Feliciano thought proudly. It wasn’t much, but he planned to cash it as soon as possible and slip the money to his brother.

Feliciano put it carefully in his backpack, pleased to note that his shift was now over, “Are you ready to go?”

“*Ja.*” Ludwig said shortly, turning towards the exit.

As soon they exited the building, Feliciano slipped his hand into Ludwig’s and pressed into his side, “Thanks for picking me up.”

“No problem. How was work?” Ludwig asked, tightening his grip on Feliciano’s hand.

He hummed happily at the contact, “It was good! I saw Matthew today, he helped me put a book back. Why do they make shelves so tall? I can’t reach the top of it and it’s really annoying!” he complained, not realizing how rapid his speech was. “There were some old ladies that I’m pretty sure were judging me, but that’s okay because they showed me some really pretty knitting patterns. I also saw- *Ah!*” he yelped as he tripped over a crack in the sidewalk.

Ludwig instantly shot a hand out and steadied him, effectively saving the smaller from an unfortunate run-in with the concrete.

As soon as Feliciano got his footing back, he turned, a ‘thank you’ on his tongue. However, he noticed that Ludwig had a hand up to his mouth. He was trying to cover up a smirk, but Feliciano saw it anyway.

“Hey, are you laughing at me?” Feliciano asked indignantly, putting his hands on his hips.

Ludwig lowered his hand and fixed him with a serious look — or it would be serious if his shoulders weren’t jumping up sporadically as he chuckled, “Not at all.”

Feliciano glared, not convinced, “Liar!” He pushed his shoulder, causing Ludwig’s gait to stutter, but not much else. Feliciano mentally cursed how small he was.

Ludwig had a flash of mischief flash through his eyes, and Feliciano was briefly reminded of Gilbert. He brought a hand up and pushed Feliciano very gently to the side. Unfortunately, he was so light that it caused him to stumble quite dramatically.

“Hey!” Feliciano yelled, but Ludwig was simply looking up innocently. Feliciano ground his teeth, that competitive spirit from the soccer match suddenly flooding back to him. He tried to push Ludwig back, but was dismayed when there was hardly a break in his stride. He groaned in annoyance, “Do I even weigh anything to you?”

That comment seemed to dull the spark in Ludwig’s eyes, and he looked at Feliciano sadly for a moment as he shook his head softly.

Woah, what’s with the mood swing? Feliciano thought a bit guiltily. However, he remained undeterred.

“Sorry.” Feliciano mumbled with a heavy sigh, reaching up to kiss Ludwig’s cheek. He felt Ludwig stiffen slightly in embarrassment, slowing down to allow Feliciano to reach up on his toes… only to be shoved harshly to the side.

Ludwig, not expecting the shove, went careening off to his left. He caught himself only to see Feliciano laughing loudly, “That’s what you get for laughing at me!”

“That was a cheap shot.” Ludwig huffed, pushing Feliciano very lightly to the side.

Since he was prepared for it, Feliciano was able to catch himself before he could trip and fall into the street. He laughed lightly, knowing that he deserved the retaliation. He approached Ludwig once more, smirking when the blond tensed up, but he relaxed when all Feliciano did was hook their arms together.

They walked the rest of the way in amicable silence until they reached the apartment. Gilbert was there, bent over his paperwork on the table, but perked up as soon as the couple entered, “Hi Feli! How are ya?”

Feliciano grinned happily, “I’m good, thanks! How are you doing?”

Gilbert pushed that trademark smirk back on his face, “Oh, ya know, being awesome as usual.”

Ludwig snorted, but didn't comment. They slipped off their shoes, and made it fully into the kitchen. Ludwig began digging through their cabinet, in search of something to eat. He produced a bag of chips and pushed it forcefully into Feliciano's hands, "Here, eat something."

Feliciano gazed down at the bag of chips. He hadn't eaten lunch that day, so naturally he was starving. However, he did find it weird that Ludwig was being so pushy out of nowhere. With a shrug, he opened the bag and began munching absently on the chips.

"So what do you two have planned for tonight?" Gilbert asked as he began gathering up the scattered documents on the table.

Ludwig shrugged vaguely, but Feliciano turned to him and said, "We both have a lot of homework, so we were gonna work on it together!"

"Aww, look at you two being all responsible on the weekend! If it were me, I would start my homework on Monday morning before class." Gilbert laughed, smiling as if he were reliving his high school days.

"Well some of us grasp the concept of *priorities*." Ludwig said pointedly.

"*Pssh,* I grasp the concept just fine! Speaking of which, I'm going out tonight." Gilbert crossed his arms with a smirk.

"Case and point." Ludwig muttered.

"Come on, learn to live a little! At least tell me that you're going to order a pizza or something. Hell, I'll buy you booze if you really want. For real, act like a teenager for once in your life!" Gilbert groaned, though there was no real malice behind the words.

Ludwig shrugged as he sat at the kitchen table. He gestured for Feliciano to take a seat across from him as Gilbert managed to put away the rest of his things. Feliciano sat, happily munching on his chips.

"Whatever, I'm gonna go get ready." Gilbert huffed, disappearing down the hallway into his room.

Ludwig shook his head, finally turning his gaze back to Feliciano, "I would apologize for him again, but it looks like you're used to it by now."

Feliciano giggled, "I still think he's nice. Besides, Lovi can be just as stubborn."

The kitchen descended into silence, the still hush only broken apart by the crunch of the chips as Feliciano chewed. Before long, he was out of the crisps and he crinkled up the bag. Ludwig looked up, "Are you still hungry? I think we have more chips if you want."

Feliciano put a hand up as Ludwig moved to dig through the cabinet once more, "I'm fine for now, thanks."

Ludwig looked conflicted, "Are you sure? Maybe Gil was onto something with the pizza…"

Feliciano sighed in exasperation, “Maybe later, I’m alright. Why don’t we start on homework, *sì?*”

Still clearly a little dubious, Ludwig nodded and retrieved some of his assignments. They began working in silence, heads bent over their respective work, until Gilbert returned.

“Wow, you guys were serious about doing homework.” he said in mild surprise.

Ludwig stared up at him, “You didn’t think we were?”

Gilbert put up his hands, “Hey man, I don’t know what kind of code you kids use these days.”

“Code?” Ludwig asked, brow furrowing in confusion.

Gilbert shrugged with a teasing smirk. Feliciano laughed as he saw Ludwig’s expression darken further at his brother’s casual attitude.

Gilbert walked to the counter and pulled out some cash, “If you guys do decide to get pizza or something, this should cover it.”

Ludwig grunted in acknowledgement, eyeing Gilbert as he put his shoes on, “You’re going out this early?”

“It’s never too early to go out, you just gotta know where to go! Besides, I need to drop some papers down at the office first.” Gilbert responded.

“Whatever,” Ludwig muttered, bending over his homework once more.

Gilbert grabbed a bag, presumably full of his paperwork, before making his way to the door, “Have a good night, you two! Please don’t work on homework the whole time. It’s Saturday, rent a movie or something.”

“Yeah, yeah. See you later.” Ludwig waved a hand dismissively.

“Bye Gil, have fun tonight!” Feliciano sang, decidedly more cheerful than the other occupant of the kitchen.

“Thanks Feli! Sorry you’re stuck with this stick in the mud.” he said, gesturing to the stern blond.

With a huff, Ludwig looked up and glared.

Gilbert shrunk away, “Geez, fine I get it. *Tchüss!*” And with that, he breezed out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

There was silence left in the wake of Gilbert’s departure. Ludwig promptly turned back to his homework, writing furiously on one of the papers. Feliciano tried to get back to work, truly he did, but he was getting bored. He began doodling on one of the pages, humming softly to himself.

It wasn't long before Ludwig looked up, only to see Feliciano mindlessly drawing all over his assignment. He cleared his throat to get Feliciano's attention, who looked up with questioning eyes.

Ludwig sighed, "Those papers are not for drawing."

"Hmm?" Feliciano peered down at the design he had been sketching out, looking back up as he explained, "But, Ludwig, this is so boring!"

"Boring or no, it is still our duty to complete the assignment." was the firm response.

Feliciano whined softly to himself, but ceased in his mindless drawing. He looked at the next question of his math assignment and attempted to solve it. When he found that he couldn't figure it out, he peered up to stare at Ludwig.

He had his eyebrows furrowed in concentration as he jotted down notes. Even the way he wrote looked strict, everything done with military precision. If Feliciano didn't know better, then he would think that Ludwig was wholly incapable of smiling with the way he schooled his face into a carefully neutral expression.

He's so serious. I wonder where he gets it from? Feliciano thought of Gilbert, wondering how the two could be such polar opposites.

He began unconsciously humming to himself once more, eyes drifting closed. He let his head rest in his hand as he relaxed, trying to ignore the fact that he had hardly started on his homework.

Another sigh forced him to open his eyes, "If you're really so bored, I guess we can take a break." Ludwig said with some difficulty.

Feliciano smiled, "Yay! This homework is just so boring, I was falling asleep."

"Yes, I noticed." Ludwig grumbled.

Feliciano laughed at his grumpy attitude, thinking that Gilbert was right about the 'stick in the mud' comment. But he knew that Ludwig had a playful side, and he could be surprisingly sweet when he let himself loosen up.

It was nearing seven in the evening, so the two decided that they would take Gilbert's advice and order pizza. It was only a short wait before it arrived, during which time Feliciano had pestered Ludwig into giving up on trying to do homework entirely. They now found themselves sitting on the couch, pizza in hand, as they tried to find something to watch on the TV.

"Ugh, there's nothing on. Why don't we just rent a movie?" Feliciano asked, flopping back dramatically on the couch.

Ludwig shrugged, "Sure, what do you want to watch?"

Feliciano thought about it, realizing that he couldn't make a decision on that either, "I don't know! Why don't you pick something?"

"I don't have a preference, either." he said unhelpfully.

After a bit more arguing, and a lot of help from the Internet, they settled on a cheesy slice of life film that didn't have any real substance behind it. However, Feliciano enjoyed the mindless nature of it, thinking that not every story needed some larger life lesson to make it enjoyable.

The pizza was running low, but Ludwig pushed yet another slice in Feliciano's hands. He found it strange how he kept doing that, at times pretty much ordering him to keep eating. Feliciano obliged, even if he was uncomfortably full. He knew he was skinny, and that he probably (most definitely) didn't eat enough at home. But he really couldn't help it — after all, his family had a finite amount of resources. He had to make sure it lasted, consequences be damned.

Feliciano was beginning to feel drowsy as he finished the last of the pizza. He pushed himself fully onto the couch, pulling his knees up to his chest. He plopped heavily to the side, resting the majority of his body on Ludwig.

Instead of stiffening up in embarrassment like usual, Ludwig simply sighed and put an arm around his shoulders, "Don't go falling asleep on me again."

Feliciano giggled, "I would never."

The subsequent snort of disbelief only caused Feliciano to laugh a little louder as he felt Ludwig shift under him. He leaned into the armrest of the couch, turning to settle more on his back, as he pulled Feliciano with him to rest almost completely on his chest.

"I'm sorry, is this alright?" Ludwig asked nervously.

As an answer, Feliciano simply dropped his head on the broad chest beneath him, humming a sigh of relief as he let himself relax completely. He turned his head to watch the movie, pressing his ear against Ludwig's chest in the process. He could hear a heartbeat, bumping just a little too quickly for the state of rest they were in.

They watched the whole movie like that, and Feliciano was rather proud of himself for staying awake the entire time. He still had his ear pressed against Ludwig's chest, nestled far too comfortably to even consider moving. At some point, Ludwig had started moving a hand up and down the back of his arm. He did it gently, almost soothingly, like he knew that something was there.

The end credits rolled by, and neither wanted to move from their spot on the couch. It was starting to get pretty late, and Feliciano knew that he was going to have to go home soon. The realization did nothing for his motivation to get up, however, as he let his eyes drift closed.

"Hey, no falling asleep." Ludwig grumbled, shaking him lightly.

Feliciano groaned in annoyance, “I’m not sleeping.”

“Not yet.” Ludwig said under his breath.

Feliciano propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at Ludwig with a pout, “Hey, I stayed up for the entire movie!”

“If you really want to impress me, then go an entire day of school without falling asleep in class.” he snarked back.

“Ugh, that’s impossible!” Feliciano whined, flopping back down.

Ludwig looked at him in disbelief, “Are you serious?”

Feliciano vigorously nodded his head, “Mister Kirkland is just so boring, you can’t expect me to stay awake in his class!”

“Unbelievable.” Ludwig muttered, shaking his head. “You know, I was joking about you being narcoleptic, but I really do wonder sometimes…”

“Don’t be mean!” Feliciano shouted, smacking him in the chest.

Ludwig shrugged, “Sometimes the truth hurts.”

Dio, when did he get so cheeky?

Feliciano groaned loudly in dismay, “I remember how nice you used to be to me, What happened?”

“Are you implying that I’m no longer nice to you?” Ludwig asked in amusement.

“Well you did try to push me into the street today.” Feliciano mumbled.

Ludwig sputtered indignantly, “I did no such thing!”

“How rude! How cruel!” Feliciano called, smirking as he brought a hand dramatically to his forehead.

“I barely even pushed you!” Ludwig defended, sitting up entirely.

Feliciano laughed as he was forced to rest in the blond’s lap, “How could you?” he cried, trying to hold back laughter as Ludwig grew increasingly frustrated. “And the way you tackled me during the football game, the horror!”

“*Gott,* where’s your off button?” Ludwig grumbled to himself, still unable to get a word in edgewise. Finally fed up with the wild mischaracterization of earlier events, he grabbed Feliciano’s shoulders and pressed their lips together.

All at once, a hush descended on the living room. Ludwig pulled back red-faced, but he seemed satisfied at Feliciano’s look of disbelief, “That works.”

Feliciano sat in a daze for a moment, trying to figure out what just happened. When he grasped just what kind of method Ludwig had used in trying to end the argument, he burst out laughing, “Is that your way of telling me to shut up?”

Ludwig’s face flushed, earlier confidence forgotten, “Um, yes? I mean, I wouldn’t say it like that. I’m sorry, that was far too forward of-”

He was promptly silenced by another kiss, this time initiated by Feliciano, who felt mischief course through his veins.

Two can play at that game!

He pushed forward with a smirk, bracing himself against the blond’s chest as he moved to deepen the kiss. He sat up on his knees, unintentionally straddling Ludwig’s hips as he did his best not to laugh at the subsequent huff of surprise. He pressed their bodies more firmly into each other, feeling Ludwig loop his arms around his waist.

Feliciano brought his hands up to cup Ludwig’s face as he pulled away slowly. He let the kiss linger, gazing very seriously into Ludwig’s bewildered eyes, “You’re right, that does work.”

Ludwig stared for a second. Then another, before his shoulders started hitching up silently. Not a sound escaped his lips, but the little puffs of air that he couldn’t seem to contain indicated that he was indeed laughing.

“What?” Feliciano asked indignantly, pushing against his chest to move away. “What’s so funny?”

He didn’t answer for a moment, shaking his head to himself. Feliciano thought that whatever he was thinking must have been pretty funny since getting Ludwig to laugh was usually quite a challenge.

“You’re ridiculous.” Ludwig finally managed to force out.

Feliciano pouted, childishly crossing his arms.

Well you started it.

He opened his mouth to voice the thought. However, the moment he drew in a breath to speak, he felt the grip on his waist tighten as he was pulled back down for another searing kiss.

His subsequent yelp of surprise was muffled as their lips crashed together. Feliciano instinctually looped his arms around Ludwig’s neck, trying to steady himself. Their lips slid against each other rather awkwardly, neither being experienced enough to truly know what they were doing. They were guided by what felt right, and at the moment *everything* about this felt right.

Feliciano noted how when he had initiated the kiss, Ludwig had acted shy and unsure. But there was nothing shy about the way he ran a hand up his back, tracing vague patterns as he broke away for a breath.

They heaved for an instant, mere inches separating their lips as they breathed in the same warm air. Feliciano, still straddling Ludwig's lap, gazed down to meet his eyes. There was not a trace of hesitation there as he craned his neck up once more, Feliciano meeting him halfway.

Feliciano suddenly felt warm as the intensity of the kiss increased. Their movements got a little more desperate, a little more forceful as Feliciano's hands found blond hair and made quick work of dislodging the strict style.

Ludwig hummed in apparent approval, bringing his own hands up to tangle them in Feliciano's hair. He tugged ever so slightly, eliciting just the smallest sound from the back of Feliciano's throat. Ludwig smirked against his lips, tugging at his hair just a little harder.

Feliciano responded by letting his mouth fall open, pushing his tongue forward to prod at Ludwig's mouth.

The action only startled him, and Ludwig suddenly broke away with a gasp.

Feliciano snapped his eyes open, already trying to push away.

"I'm sorry! I shouldn't have done that! I-I can go, just-" he stuttered, trying to disentangle himself.

"Hey, wait! Stop, it's fine." Ludwig said frantically, gripping Feliciano tightly so he couldn't move away.

"It is?" he asked anxiously.

"*Ja,* you just startled me is all." Ludwig soothed.

It took a few more minutes, but eventually Ludwig was able to talk Feliciano out of his slight panic. He buried his face in the crook of Ludwig's neck in embarrassment, "Sorry, maybe we should slow down a bit."

Ludwig nodded, back to tracing patterns on Feliciano's back. The intensity that had permeated the air around them dissipated, leaving behind an atmosphere of tense awkwardness. Neither knew how to break the silence, so they simply sat holding each other. Ludwig eventually shifted so that Feliciano no longer straddled his hips. They now sat side by side, Feliciano's head rested on his shoulder.

Ludwig offered his hand, and Feliciano entwined their fingers. At some point, Ludwig had turned the TV back on, letting the first channel to flip on play. Feliciano was content just to sit and forget about the awkward turn of events, but saw his phone buzz on the cushion beside him.

He sighed, dropping Ludwig's hand as he looked to see who had texted him.

From: Lovi

Where are you?

Feliciano checked the time, noting that it was almost ten-thirty.

Lovi's not even off work yet, is something wrong?

To: Lovi

At Ludwig's still

He had barely finished hitting the send button when he got a response.

From: Lovi

Don't leave yet

What?

Something was wrong, he could feel it. Feliciano leaned forward to bend over his phone.

Ludwig sat up too, sensing his unease, "What's wrong?"

Feliciano furrowed his eyebrows, "I don't know, Lovi's just being kinda weird."

To: Lovi

Why? Is everything ok?

From: Lovi

Just stay put until the loudmouth gets there

Loudmouth? Who is Lovi talking about?

He showed the text to Ludwig in confusion, both of them trying to decipher what it could mean when the door burst open. Gilbert charged frantically in, looking incredibly uneasy.

Ludwig shot him a disapproving scowl, "*Bruder,* are you drunk?"

Gilbert ignored him, instead locking eyes with Feliciano, "Are you ready to go home?"

Feliciano was confused, but nonetheless answered, "Yeah, is something wrong?"

Gilbert sighed, but shook his head, "I met your brother today, he asked me to drive you home."

"He did? But why?" Feliciano asked in shock, thinking that was wildly out of character for his brother.

Ludwig stood up and fixed his brother with a questioning look, "What's going on?"

Gilbert shook his head once more, "It's not my place to tell."

Feliciano stood, grabbing his backpack. He picked up his phone and texted Lovino.

To: Lovi

Gilbert says that he met you tonight, are you still at work?

From: Lovi

Yes. I have to finish my shift, will explain tomorrow. Text me when you get home

Feliciano put his phone down, looking up when he heard Ludwig asking his brother, "Are you sure you can drive? How much did you have to drink?"

Gilbert crossed his arms, "Not nearly enough. I'm fine, I only had a few drinks and that was hours ago."

Ludwig nodded, apparently satisfied with the answer. Gilbert walked off to his room, granting the two some privacy.

"Uh, I guess I'll see you later?" Ludwig said awkwardly.

"Yeah…" Feliciano breathed, voice tinged with unease.

Ludwig wrapped him in a warm hug, holding him tightly as Feliciano felt some of his anxiety ebb away. He nestled his head under Ludwig's chin as he gripped back. They finally broke apart when Gilbert rushed back into the kitchen. The fact that he hadn't teased Ludwig since he returned unsettled both of them.

"Text me if you need anything." Ludwig said nervously.

Feliciano nodded, moving to join Gilbert in the kitchen.

"Ready?" he asked once more.

"*Sì,* let's go." Feliciano said softly.

With a final wave to Ludwig, they made their way out of the apartment. It was a short walk down to the street, where Gilbert had left his car. Feliciano hopped in the passenger seat and tried not to let his imagination run wild.

What happened? Lovi sounded so nervous, and Gil is being weird too. Is everyone alright? Oh no, I haven't heard anything from Toni! Is he hurt? Sick? But if he was then Lovi wouldn't stay to finish his shift…

His thought process was cut short when Gilbert got into the driver's seat and started the car. He didn't say anything as he began to drive down the road, occasionally asking for directions from Feliciano.

"Hey, Gil?" Feliciano asked meekly.

“Hmm?” he answered.

“Is everything alright?”

Silence.

Feliciano began picking at his nails, watching as Gilbert’s face turned conflicted, “Yeah, it’s going to be fine.”

“Is Lovi okay?” he asked nervously.

Gilbert sighed and nodded, “Yeah, he’s fine.” He looked at Feliciano out of the corner of his eye, “Damn, you two look so similar.”

Feliciano giggled, “Yeah, we get that a lot.”

Gilbert snorted, “No, for real. You guys could be twins! I feel kind of dumb that I didn’t recognize him right away.”

“Yeah, we get that too. Lovi’s personality throws people off.” Feliciano said with a small smile.

They pulled up to Feliciano’s apartment building just a few minutes later. Gilbert looked like he wanted to say something, struggling with his words. Feliciano laughed a little, for once believing that he was related to Ludwig.

“Here.” Gilbert grit out, producing what looked to be a business card. Feliciano reached out and took it, “It has my number on it. If you need anything, call me. My phone is always on.”

Feliciano nodded, putting the card in his pocket. His concern was growing by the second, and he was frustrated because he knew that he wouldn’t see Lovino until the following morning.

Unless I stay up tonight…

Gilbert sighed and ruffled Feliciano’s hair, “Seriously, don’t hesitate to call me.”

Feliciano was thrown off by Gilbert’s serious demeanor — he didn’t know that he could even act that stern. He wished Gilbert a good night and stepped out of the car without another word.

Gilbert didn’t pull his car away until Feliciano had stepped completely in the building. He watched as one of the lights flickered, before it burned out completely. He felt a shiver crawl up his spine as the lobby seemed just a little less inviting. Feliciano made his way upstairs, unable to shake the sense of foreboding that haunted his every step.

Chapter End Notes

Ohhh crap my dudes, shit is going down! Also, you want some fluff? Have some fluff! I got all embarrassed writing that crap, despite the fact that I'm in my 20s and that should not freaking embarrass me anymore lol.

Anyways, thanks for reading! These chapters are getting progressively longer, whoops. Hopefully they're getting progressively better too, but who knows.

It's been interesting trying to write a fresh relationship. I didn't want to write a story where the ship getting together is the endgame (I've just seen the same pining crap over and over), I thought it would be more interesting to write about a young, developing relationship. Y'know, learning about each other and setting boundaries and whatnot. But also, the focus of the story isn't romance either, more family drama and shiz, but I digress.

Hopefully it's a bit of a unique spin on an old trope, but I'm probably falling victim to about every cliche out there (Oh, well, at least I'm having a good time doing it XD)

As always, let me know what y'all think. Bless up, have a good night/day!

'Till next time!

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino breathed in deeply, pushing his back against the wall as he closed his eyes. He finally had a reprieve from the utter madhouse that was the bar on a Saturday night, although it could hardly last. He glanced at the clock, noting that it was just barely eight o'clock. He groaned loudly in annoyance.

Saturdays were always obnoxiously busy, and Lovino knew that he couldn't hide out in the back for any longer. He said a short mental prayer as he pushed the doors open, facing the noise once more.

"There you are! And here I thought you abandoned me." Elizabeta tutted as she prepared another drink.

Lovino didn't respond as he started taking drink orders from their demanding patrons. The night was still young, and they were sure to get even busier that night.

He was mixing another overpriced cocktail when a man sauntered up to the bar. Lovino recognized the white hair and red eyes immediately — they belonged to a semi-regular, and an insufferable loudmouth. Lovino had yet to actually interact directly with the man since he usually tried to hit on Elizabeta. However, it seemed that his luck had run out.

"Hey there, never seen you here before. I'm Gilbert." the man said with an infuriating smirk.

"Pfft, you've never seen me because you're usually too drunk to remember anything." Lovino snarked back, not even bothering to look up.

"Ouch, point taken. But seriously, how long have you been working here?" he asked, the smirk not budging from his face.

Oh how Lovino would love to knock that smug look right from his face. If only he didn't need this stupid job, "What's it to ya?"

Gilbert put his hands up in surrender, "Woah, I'm not tryna fight, just trying to make small talk."

"Do us all a favor and don't." Lovino growled, handing off a bottle of beer to one of the needy customers.

Suddenly, Gilbert was twisting his head to the side, "You're actually kinda familiar. Do I know you from somewhere?"

Lovino snorted, "Don't you know all Italians look the same, fuckwit."

"Woah~ feisty." Gilbert sang, his eyebrows shooting up suggestively. "I like feisty."

Elizabeta chose that moment to jump in, “Step off Gilbert, he’s taken.”

Gilbert immediately deflated, ceasing in his brash flirting with a sigh, “They always are.”

“Excuse me?” Lovino asked indignantly, but he was ignored.

“What about you, I hear you’re-”

“Also taken.” Elizabeta said with finality.

Gilbert groaned, “Don’t tell me you’re back with that stuffy librarian, that guy’s a total pushover!”

Elizabeta glared at him, “That is none of your business, now order something or leave.”

“Whatever.” he grumbled, sitting at one of the barstools as he asked for another beer.

Jesus, what a fucking idiot. Lovino thought, irritated with the way Gilbert was looking at him curiously. He tried to ignore the staring, instead focusing on the multitudes of other ~~drunks~~ *valuable customers.*

After another few minutes of obnoxious staring, Gilbert finally snapped his fingers in apparent realization. He waved his hand wildly, obviously trying to flag Lovino down. He had half a mind to ignore the German loudmouth, but Elizabeta was tied up at the moment, and something told him that he wouldn’t be able to get away that easily.

God-fucking-dammit.

“What?!” Lovino snapped as he stalked his way over to the albino.

“Do you have a brother?” he asked excitedly.

There’s no way he means Feliciano, right?

Lovino crossed his arms, “So what if I do?”

Gilbert laughed, “*Oh mein Gott,* I can’t believe I didn’t recognize you! You look *just* like Feli!”

Lovino glared, irritated that his brother’s name was said so familiarly, “And how in the hell do you know my brother?”

“He’s dating my little brother, Ludwig! I just saw him, actually.” Gilbert said happily.

Lovino brought a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, letting loose a long-suffering sigh.

Of all the people, Feliciano just had to date somebody with this degenerate as a brother. Fucking potato-bastards…

“Fucking fantastic. Great. Super. I’m so… *happy.”* Lovino grit out.

Gilbert either didn't notice his obvious disdain, or didn't care, because he kept on smiling, "I know right! Small world, huh?"

Lovino ignored him, instead opting to just get back to work. He didn't blame Feliciano for dating Ludwig, but really, did his taste in men really have to be so *German?*

Gilbert sat contentedly at the bar nursing his beer as he finally let Lovino get back to work. It was kind of sad watching the albino drinking all alone, but Lovino refused to feel pity for him.

Finally, after the rush died down a bit, Lovino was given a moment to just stand and breathe. He wiped down the countertop in silence as he cast an eye over the crowd. It was the usual breed of carefree young adults, and Lovino usually found amusement in watching some of the males try (keyword here being *try*) to chat up the women. It never usually went past harmless, if not embarrassing, flirting, but he liked to keep an eye out for creeps.

Satisfied that nobody was being accosted, Lovino turned to Elizabeta, "Hey are you good for a few? I think I'm gonna take a break."

Elizabeta smiled, "Go ahead, I'll call for you if it gets busy again."

Lovino nodded in appreciation, walking around the bar and onto the main floor. The building they were in was rather small, and the only real place to get away from the hustle and bustle of the bar was out the back door and into a dark alleyway. Unfortunately, most of the staff typically gathered out there to smoke — nevermind the fact that he hated cigarettes with a vengeance, he was *not* about to risk his respiratory health all while standing in the cold.

No fucking thank you.

Strangely, the best place to take a break was right on the main floor. So long as he kept to himself, nobody would approach him — they didn't have a uniform, so nothing really distinguished him from the rest of the crowd.

It was busy, meaning that Lovino couldn't find anywhere to sit. Therefore, he found himself hiding in plain sight, leaning against the wall in the least populated corner that he could find. The spot was ideal since he was out of view from most patrons, but he could still keep an eye on the bar in case it got too busy for Elizabeta to handle on her own.

Lovino sighed as he closed his eyes, letting his head rest on the wall behind him. It really was a shame that he couldn't find anywhere to sit, but he didn't care so long as he didn't have to talk to anybody.

"Excuse me, I'd like to order a drink."

Lovino groaned.

So much for not talking to anybody.

He didn't lift his head from its position against the wall, keeping his eyes shut as he said, "I'm on break, Elizabeta can help you."

“No, I don’t think she can.”

“Listen, I don’t think you understand.” he started, finally lifting his head off the wall. Lovino opened his eyes, having every intention to tell the rude customer off, but any word or insult that he planned on saying died on his tongue.

No…

Lovino’s eyes blew wide open, his heart galloping wildly in his chest.

It can’t be.

But it was.

Lovino stared ahead, disbelief written all over his face. Antonio had warned him about this. Apparently he had shared a rather ominous phone call with this awful man, but Lovino didn’t want to believe it. He wanted to yell, to scream at the man in front of him, but he didn’t. *He couldn’t.* He felt frozen, unable to do anything but stare.

Cristiano Valenti was an imposing man. While not necessarily tall, he moved in a way that screamed self-assuredness. He had greasy brown hair and olive skin, his eyes glinting a familiar amber color. He looked like he might have had an athletic build in the past, but his features had rounded out. Despite that, he looked like the kind of guy you would put your money on in a fight — not muscular, but built nonetheless. He was clean-shaven, and obviously took great pride in how he looked. The only thing that marred his carefully groomed appearance was a long scar that ran along the underside of his jawline.

“C’mon now, four years and you can’t even bother to say anything?” he asked with a smirk.

Lovino balled his hands into fists, finally finding his voice, “What the hell are you doing here?”

Cristiano shrugged, “I’m trying to order a drink, but the service here is just awful.”

“Bullshit.”

“No really, I’ve been here for a while now and nobody’s even offered me a menu.” he said flippantly, accent coloring his words.

God, he’s just as insufferable as I remember.

“Cut the shit, what do you want?” Lovino growled.

Cristiano dropped the act, letting his face fall into something more neutral. He took a menacing step forward, watching with satisfaction as his son backed away, “You know what I want, Lovino.”

Despite feeling dread crawl up his spine as a result of that awful man standing so close, Lovino was still able to put up his facade of confidence, “You want to take back custody of Feliciano. Yeah, not gonna fucking happen.”

Cristiano showed off his unnaturally white teeth as he chuckled lightly, “It’s funny that you put it that way.”

Lovino was quickly getting fed up, “What are you blabbering about now?”

“I’m not taking ‘back’ anything.” he said smugly.

“But you said-”

“Maybe I didn’t explain myself well enough. Then again, you did refuse to answer my calls…” he trailed off thoughtfully.

“Cause you were fucking harrassing me!” Lovino all but screeched, attracting the attention of some of the patrons.

Cristiano narrowed his amber eyes — a trait he shared with his youngest son. But instead of exuding warmth and innocence like Feliciano’s, his gleamed with cool confidence and currently, irritation, “Don’t cause a scene, I thought I raised you better than that.”

“You really think so, asshole?” Lovino snorted, “You were a sorry excuse for a father.”

Cristiano took another step forward, smirking when Lovino pushed his back harshly into the wall with a sharp intake of breath, “Like I was saying, I’m not taking *back* anything. I never lost custody — hell, your grandfather didn’t even have custody! I *let* him take you.”

What?

“You’re bluffing.” Lovino said darkly.

He shrugged, “Are you willing to take those odds? As far as the law is aware, I’m still Feliciano’s guardian. If I really wanted to, I could just pick him up and go back to Italy and there’s not a thing you could do about it.”

No fucking way.

“If that’s true, then why haven’t you already?” Lovino pushed, desperate to call Cristiano out on his bluff.

With a drawn-out sigh, Cristiano backed off as he gesticulated loosely with his hands, “Unfortunately, I understand how stubborn you are. I had to take some precautionary measures.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” Lovino demanded.

Cristiano waved his hand dismissively, “Oh, you’ll see soon enough.”

“Just stay the hell away from us, bastard! If you try anything, then I’ll take you to court,” Lovino exploded, his hands flailing wildly as he screamed, *“Fucking try me you piece of shit!”*

With a scowl, Cristiano caught one of those flailing hands by the wrist. He leaned in close, hissing dangerously, “What did I say about causing a scene?”

Lovino gulped, wincing when the grip on his arm became painful. He yanked it back, and was surprised when he was immediately released. He held his wrist to his chest, trying to rub away the throbbing pain there.

“Anyway,” Cristiano continued as if nothing had happened, “I thought you might say that. I don’t want a custody battle, but I guess I’m left with no choice. But tell me something,” he leaned in close once more, and Lovino cringed, “do you know how difficult it is for a sibling to be awarded custody?”

In all honesty, Lovino had no clue. Once Roma died, he kind of just assumed that he was Feliciano’s guardian. He didn’t know that Roma never had custody of them, and all it took was a few forged documents to enroll Feliciano in school and get this job. The subsequent flurry of events directly after Roma’s death, mixed with the fact that they had been grieving allowed Lovino to conveniently forget about such trivial things like the law. He was only a teenager, for fuck’s sake, how the hell was he supposed to know about any of this?

Lovino glared, though it lacked its normal heat, “I don’t care how difficult it is. I’ll kick your ass, in court or otherwise!”

“Y’know, I was kind of hoping you would say that.” Cristiano smiled almost cheerfully. “I think I missed that attitude of yours, although I much prefer your brother’s.”

“I don’t give a damn, stay away from him!” Lovino shouted, stamping his foot harshly on the ground.

But the little outburst was ignored, “I actually saw him today.”

“You-”

“Relax, I didn’t talk to him.” Cristiano cut him off sharply before continuing, “He’s really not looking well. Are you sure you’re feeding him alright?”

Lovino thought about it. His brother has always been scrawny despite his rather voracious appetite.

He takes a lunch to school every day, and he always eats at breakfast… doesn’t he?

“You’re looking pretty skinny, too. Money troubles?” he guessed smugly.

Lovino refused to dignify that with a response, simply glaring ahead.

“Sounds about right. But I’m curious, how’d you get a job at a bar?” Cristiano asked lightly, although he sounded pleased.

“What the fuck do you mean?” Lovino asked angrily.

Cristiano smiled with satisfaction, “Correct me if I’m wrong, but you’re only nineteen, right?’

Lovino paled.

Shit shit shit. Of all of the things this fucker bothers to remember about me, it just had to be my age. Fuck!

He tried to play it cool, but he was beginning to panic. Cristiano simply looked at him, and this time Lovino didn’t even try to put up his usual angry front, “Why?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s the point of all of this? What do you want from us?” Lovino asked desperately.

I don’t get it! What’s he after? How could he possibly benefit from taking Feliciano away from me?

“All in due time.” was the infuriating answer. “You wouldn’t mind if I had a chat with Feliciano now, would you?”

Lovino snapped.

“I told you to *stay the fuck away from him!”* he screeched. He tried to get away, tired of being cornered against the wall. Cristiano barred his exit, but Lovino pushed against him in a desperate attempt to just *get away.*

His eyes darkened when Lovino tried to physically shove him out of the way. Cristiano clapped a hand over his son’s chest, pushing him harshly against the wall.

Gasping in surprise, Lovino’s head smacked into the brick behind him, causing his vision to swim dangerously.

The hand wasn’t removed from his chest, and Cristiano leaned in close to growl darkly, “I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

“J-just, please go away.” Lovino breathed, ashamed that he had resorted to begging.

Cristiano seemed to think about it, “No, I don’t think so.”

“Let me go.”

“Go away, let me go. You are full of demands today.” Cristiano said, shaking his head in disappointment.

Lovino closed his eyes, trying to escape this horrible feeling of being *trapped*. It was an awful, disgusting feeling that made him want to squirm where he stood, pinned against the wall. He never wanted to feel this way again.

“Hey, look at me when I’m talking to you-”

The hand on his chest was suddenly ripped away, and Lovino snapped his eyes open in shock. Cristiano no longer hovered menacingly over him. Instead, he was looking at the back of a tall albino.

Gilbert stood in front of him, hand held out protectively as he stared Cristiano down, “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” he spat the words out, the German accent becoming more pronounced in his anger.

“We were just having a talk, no need to freak out.” Cristiano grumbled petulantly, though Lovino couldn’t see him from behind the human barrier that Gilbert created.

“Well your *talk* is over. Get out.” Gilbert growled.

Cristiano sighed, trying to peer over Gilbert the best he could to lock eyes with Lovino, “It was good to see you again, *Lovi.* We’ll be in contact.”

Gilbert shifted his stance to cut off the imposing man’s view of Lovino.

With an annoyed glare, Cristiano spun on his heel and stalked huffily out of the bar.

As soon as he was out the door, Gilbert whipped around, “Hey man, are you alright?”

Honestly? No. Lovino was absolutely not alright. He slumped heavily against the wall as the adrenaline in his body started to drain. His mind spun from both the contact with the rough brick, and all of the information that was revealed to him that night.

“Hey, look at me.” Gilbert ordered, hands suddenly on Lovino’s shoulders.

Lovino tried to shrug him off, “I-I’m fine.” He mentally cursed the stutter.

Gilbert was obviously not convinced, “Sure, like I believe that. Is there somewhere quiet we can go?”

Lovino ignored him, “Have to get back to work.”

Gilbert looked over his shoulder, spotting Elizabeta. He put up a finger in a motion that clearly said, *stay put.*

Lovino obliged, if only because he was still trying to process what had happened. He glanced around the room, surprised that things were going on just as normal. Nobody seemed to notice that he had just been dealt a world-shattering blow.

Is the loudmouth the only that saw?

Before Lovino could think any more on the subject, Gilbert returned, “Okay, she can cover for you for a little bit longer. Now, is there like a staff room or something?”

Lovino shook his head, instead pointing mutely down the hallway. Gilbert’s eyes followed the point, spotting a door at the end of the short walkway. With a sharp nod, he started

walking in the indicated direction, casting a fleeting glance behind him to confirm that Lovino was indeed following.

When they emerged in the dark alleyway, blessedly devoid of any other people, Lovino plopped down heavily on the ground. He tried to ignore the fact that the concrete below him was littered with cigarettes and trash, and instead focused on the cool brick as he leaned against the wall.

Gilbert sat down beside him in silence, shooting vaguely worried looks his way.

Lovino pulled his knees to his chest and squeezed them tight. He dropped his forehead down to rest on his knees, a headache beginning to pound uncomfortably at the spot where he had been slammed into the wall.

“Hey, you’re not concussed are you?” Gilbert asked worriedly.

Lovino groaned, not saying anything. How could he? He was about to lose everything, so what was the point?

“Okay, that does not make me feel better.”

Lovino sighed, looking up with a tearful gaze, “I’m fine.”

Gilbert looked at him dubiously, “Um, no offence dude, but you look like shit.”

Lovino laughed hollowly, “I-I’m fine.”

Gilbert nodded, but didn’t voice his obvious disbelief. Lovino thought he saw concern flash in those red eyes, but he couldn’t confirm it because the albino suddenly looked blurry.

Desperately trying to keep the tears at bay, Lovino sucked in a harsh breath. He was *fine,* and he was hellbent on proving it, “I-I’m - I’m…”

A sob ripped through his frame, and he hardly felt when Gilbert snaked an arm around his shoulders. The albino looked away out of respect, pulling the smaller closer to his side.

“I-I-I’m - sh-shit,” Lovino could hardly get a word out. “I’m *fi-i-ne,* d-dammit!”

“I know.”

“I-I’m f-fine!”

“I know.”

Lovino gasped, trying desperately to put an end to his pathetic crying. He stopped trying to speak altogether, instead focusing on his stuttered breathing. He heard a low, keening noise, and it took him an embarrassing amount of time to realize that he was the source of it.

His crying was growing louder, and he tried to muffle it by bringing his fist to his mouth. Lovino felt his body shaking, and the arm around his shoulders tightened.

I can't fucking do this, I just can't.

He let the tears fall freely around his face. They were warm, and burned at his eyes, but Lovino didn't care anymore. He let himself break down, crying even harder than he had the day Roma died.

It's all his fault! Why didn't he take custody of us? Did he not want us?

That thought caused Lovino to sob even harder. He didn't understand what was happening, *why* it was happening. He shook his head, trying to shut off his emotions entirely and become distant. It ended up being a futile effort as he continued to fall apart in front of a complete stranger. If Lovino had been coherent, he would have stormed off back into the building in embarrassment. But he wasn't, so he didn't. He just continued to wail brokenly in the deserted alley.

After what could have been hours, Lovino was finally, *finally,* able to get control of himself. He still hiccuped every few seconds, and his eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, but at least he wasn't actively crying anymore.

The silence was deafening, and Lovino felt as empty as the alleyway around them. Gilbert still had an arm around him, but Lovino really couldn't find it in himself to be angry.

After a few more tense minutes, Gilbert broke the uneasy silence, "Are you done?"

Lovino shrugged. While he felt he might burst into tears at any moment, he thought that he had cried enough for the time being.

Gilbert sighed, "Look, I want to help, but I'm not gonna force you to talk."

Lovino thought about it. On the one hand, Gilbert was a complete stranger. Sure, he knew his brother, but Lovino had only truly interacted with him that night. Then again, Gilbert was an outsider looking in — he may be able to add a fresh perspective on this awful predicament.

Fuck it, it's not like I have anything to lose.

Lovino cleared his throat, cringing when his voice came out raspy anyway, "That piece of shit cornering me? Yeah, that's my asshole of a father."

Gilbert sucked in a breath, "Really?"

"Yes, try to keep up." Lovino snapped, some of his attitude returning. "Anyway, we lived with him in Italy until a couple years ago. I thought we left him there for good."

Wishful thinking.

Gilbert nodded along, "Feli said something like that. You moved in with your grandfather, right?"

Lovino snorted, "Yeah, but apparently the geezer never took custody of me or my brother. I can't fucking believe this bullshit!"

Gilbert stared in confusion, his arm falling away from Lovino's shoulders, "Hold on, what are you saying?"

Lovino's anger was returning as he worked himself up, "What I'm saying is that that piece of garbage is still legally Feliciano's guardian. He wants to take him back to Italy!"

"What? But why?" Gilbert asked in shock.

Lovino threw his hands up, "Your guess is as good as mine. He's an abusive piece of shit who likes to watch us suffer, does he need another reason?"

Gilbert sighed heavily, muttering to himself, "Some people are cruel just for the sake of being cruel." Suddenly, a thought seemed to come to him, his head snapping to the side as he asked, "Wait, does he smoke cigarettes?"

Lovino looked at him in mild surprise, "Yeah, he always has."

"Son of a *fucking* bitch." Gilbert growled, staring viciously ahead.

Silence descended on them once more. Lovino was confused at Gilbert's outburst, but didn't question him. Instead, he brought a hand up to scrub at his face, trying to get rid of any evidence of his breakdown.

"What are you going to do?" Gilbert asked quietly.

Lovino froze. What was he going to do? He wasn't about to take this lying down. He had meant it when he said that he would take this to court, but he was clueless as to what he needed to do.

Do I need a lawyer? Shit, isn't this kind of stuff like really expensive?

"I don't know. I guess I need to figure out how to get custody." Lovino said thoughtfully.

"Well the first thing you need to do is file an application. You're gonna need evidence that your father is a danger to Feli's safety. You said he was abusive?"

Lovino nodded in shock, "Yeah."

"Do you have evidence of the abuse?"

He thought about it. Lovino himself still had scars, as did Feliciano. It had been a long time since Lovino had even thought of them, most of them being in easily concealed areas. He wasn't sure if that was sufficient evidence, but it was something.

"Yeah, there's evidence." Lovino said, bringing a hand up to rub absentmindedly at the back of his arm.

Gilbert nodded sharply, "Good. It's not going to be easy, but I'm friends with a super awesome family attorney. You'll love him."

“Woah, woah, wait.” Lovino brought a hand up, “How in the hell do you know so much about this?”

Gilbert grinned confidently, “I’m a social worker! I mostly work with kids and families, so I know a lot about this area of the law.”

Lovino nodded, feeling just a flicker of hope ignite in his chest, “No shit?”

Gilbert nodded his head enthusiastically.

Well damn, I guess the loudmouth is good for something after all.

“Alright, so what do I do next?” Lovino asked.

Gilbert thought about it, “Well without getting too technical about things, you’re going to have to prove that you can provide stability. Y’know, like being able to provide both physically and emotionally.”

“Right, is that it?”

“Well that’s the long and short of it. It sounds easy, but I’m not gonna lie to you, you’re at a serious disadvantage here.” Gilbert said earnestly.

Lovino nodded, expecting that. Cristiano had acted so confidently, like he had already won the battle. The attitude made him nervous, like he was forgetting about something, “Yeah, I figured.”

Gilbert dug around in his pocket for a moment, “C’mon, I know I grabbed some at the office.” he muttered to himself. Suddenly, he pulled out what looked to be a business card out of his pocket with a flourish, “Ah-ha! Here, it has my number on it.”

Lovino reached out and took the card. It had a simple design, simply giving the address of what was presumably an office, Gilbert’s name, and a phone number. Lovino put it in his pocket with a mumbled, “Thanks.”

He sighed to himself, realizing he was going to have to get back to work. Lovino stood up, leaning against the wall as Gilbert stood next to him. He checked his phone, noting that they had been out there far longer than he had originally thought.

Shit, it’s almost ten-thirty!

Lovino was about to rush into the building when he remembered something that made his blood run cold.

‘You wouldn’t mind if I had a chat with Feliciano now, would you?’

“Fuck!” Lovino shouted.

Gilbert jumped at the suddenness of the shout, “What? What’s wrong?” He looked around wildly, trying to find the threat.

“Shit, shit! Goddammit!” Lovino ranted, hands tangling in his hair.

“What’s wrong?” Gilbert tried again, a bit more frantically this time.

Lovino rounded on him, “My brother was at your apartment when you left, right?”

Gilbert nodded, his whole body tense.

“Do you think he’s still there?” Lovino asked as he frantically sent a text to Feliciano.

“I don’t know, maybe?” Gilbert answered anxiously.

Lovino sighed in relief when he received a text back from Feliciano almost instantly. He texted back, telling him to stay put, before turning to Gilbert once more, “He’s still there, can you drive him home?”

Gilbert nodded without hesitation, “*Ja,* is he alright?”

Lovino nodded, still tapping on his phone, “Yeah, I just remembered something my dad said.”

“Okay, gotcha.” Gilbert said, already beginning to open the door, “I’ll go right now.”

Lovino nodded, following Gilbert inside. He wanted nothing more at the moment than to go home and make sure his brother was safe. However, as Gilbert pointed out, he needed to be able to prove that he was stable. That included financial stability, which meant that he had no choice but to finish his shift.

He’ll be fine with the loudmouth. Antonio’s home, too. He’ll be fine, dammit!

He tried to calm himself down, emerging into the main area of the bar. He was relieved to note that it wasn’t too busy, and that Elizabeta was doing just fine on her own.

Lovino watched as Gilbert threw on his jacket, and he began chewing on his lip as he waged war with himself. With a sigh, he tugged on the albino’s jacket to get his attention.

“Yeah?” he asked, turning his startling red eyes on a fidgeting Lovino.

“Um, thanks, I guess. For, ya know.” he gestured vaguely.

Gilbert smiled, looking just a bit smug, “Don’t worry about it. The awesome me is always happy to help.”

Lovino groaned, “Don’t make me take it back.” Gilbert laughed obnoxiously, but was cut off when Lovino started speaking again, “Just, get him home safe.”

That seemed to sober Gilbert up, as he immediately let his face settle into a serious expression, “I promise.” At Lovino’s subsequent nod, he turned and rushed out of the bar.

With a sigh, he turned and made his way back behind the bar. Elizabeta marched angrily up to him, “Do you know how long you were gone for?”

Lovino looked up to meet her eyes, “I know, sorry.”

Her gaze softened, and Lovino realized that his eyes were probably still embarrassingly red.

Shit, I should have gone to the bathroom first. Who knows how fucking pathetic I look right now.

With a sigh, she turned and let it go, “I suppose I can forgive you this time.”

Lovino nodded in appreciation. He rubbed at his eyes one more time before getting back to work. There would be time to worry himself silly over the events of the night later, but right now he had a job to do. He was going to prove that he was a capable guardian, and nothing was going to stop him.

I’ll be a better guardian than you ever were. Just watch me, bastard.

Chapter End Notes

Oh baby, it's all goin' down. Lol I can't believe how quickly I wrote this.

Anyways, thank y'all so much for reading! I did a lot of research for this chapter and the ones to come. I am also taking just a little bit of a creative license with some of the details, but I am trying to be as accurate as possible. That being said, I am not infallible, please let me know if you spot anything obviously wrong or offensive and I will change it!

So, I am moving all the way across the country (it's a 30 hour fucking drive holy shit). That being said, I won't have access to my computer for a while. But don't worry! There will def be a chapter by the end of the week, I've just gotten into the habit of posting every 3 days and I don't want anyone to think I've abandoned this when I don't post.

Let me know what you think! Our villain is here and boy howdy is he a DICK.

Also, flirty but competent Gilbert is my life. I love this boy, and he deserves nice things. So does Lovi, but y'all are seeing how that's going XD

Bless y'all, lots of hugs from me <3

'Till next time!

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All was dark in the little apartment, the faint glow from the muted television the only source of light. The air was still, and it could almost pass off as peaceful. Almost, if not for the nervous energy that permeated the atmosphere. The ever-present hum of the city was the only thing that accompanied the shallow breathing of the only two inhabitants in the room.

Antonio shifted minutely on the couch, trying to find a more comfortable position. His movements were rather restricted at the moment and he was doing his absolute best not to wake the slumbering Feliciano, who was currently utilizing Antonio as a human pillow. Not that he particularly minded, but it was getting pretty uncomfortable just sitting in one place.

With a sigh, Antonio resigned himself to the fact that he was well and truly stuck. Lovino should be home soon, and he had some questions.

He could be a little more straightforward in his texts. Honestly, no wonder Feli was so freaked out.

In fact, Feliciano had come home in quite a tizzy. The moment he walked through the door, he began hitting Antonio with a barrage of questions, none of which he had an answer to. Feliciano had shown him the cryptic texts from Lovino, and Antonio was soon confused as well. He had promptly picked up his own phone and asked Lovino what was going on. However, the answers he'd gotten were hardly forthcoming. In fact, they were borderline defensive.

Antonio looked down to Feliciano, who had flopped rather comically against him a little over an hour ago. His mouth hung open just the smallest bit, and his hair was splayed messily across his forehead and onto Antonio's chest. He had his feet curled up on the couch, and the slight rise and fall of his chest was the only movement the otherwise fidgety teen exhibited.

Despite Antonio's efforts to persuade otherwise, Feliciano had resolved himself to wait until Lovino got home to demand what was wrong directly. Antonio, not wanting him to stay up by himself, had plopped himself down on the couch next to him. The time was nearing close to half past two, and now he could also feel sleep beginning to creep in.

Antonio yawned, his will to stay up to confront Lovino waning with every passing second. Just as he was about to throw in the towel and let his eyes drift shut, the door creaked open.

Lovino crept in, obviously not seeing the other two occupants of the apartment curled up on the couch. He took off his shoes and glanced over to where the TV was still playing silently. Antonio met his eyes, and Lovino had to suppress a shriek of surprise.

"What the hell-"

"Shhh!" Antonio shushed, nodding down to where Feliciano still slept.

Lovino looked wide-eyed for a moment, before sending Antonio a look that clearly said, *'What the fuck is this?'*

Antonio shrugged softly, trying not to jostle Feliciano too much. He watched as Lovino pinched the bridge of his nose and took in a deep breath. When he did finally look back up, Antonio was surprised to find that there was no real annoyance in his eyes.

He looks sad.

Antonio would usually spring up and demand to know what was wrong, but he was rather preoccupied being used as a pillow at the current moment. Instead, he tried to ask the question through his eyes alone.

"I'm fine, bastard." Lovino whispered, padding softly into the dark living room.

Antonio watched him as he just stood in front of the couch, like he was trying to take everything in. The look on his face was strange. His brow was furrowed, and a wistful sort of sadness coloured every line on his face. But there was also determination there, a fire that refused to be extinguished.

Instead of saying anything, Lovino simply motioned sharply with his head towards the hallway. Antonio stared blankly, not entirely sure what was being asked of him. Lovino sighed again before pointing at Feliciano, then Antonio, and finally the hallway. After a few more seconds of confused staring, Antonio finally understood what Lovino wanted.

Antonio peeled Feliciano off of him as gently as he could, laying him down softly on the couch. Then, in a motion that was growing far too familiar for comfort, he bent down and scooped the sleeping Italian up, carrying him as gently as possible to his room.

Lovino nodded once in confirmation that this was indeed what he wanted, before he made his way into the kitchen.

The short trip to the bedroom was not met with any sort of resistance. Feliciano was out like a light, and Antonio doubted that there was anything he could do bar dropping him (and maybe not even then) that would wake him up. Nevertheless, Antonio placed Feliciano down gently on the bed and pulled the covers up to his shoulders. Feliciano instinctually curled up as soon as he was put down, but that was the extent of his stirring.

"Buenas noches." Antonio whispered as he backed carefully out of the room.

He shut the door gently with a soft *click* and made his way out to the kitchen. Lovino was there, sitting at the table with his head balanced in his hand as he stared blankly forward. He obviously had something on his mind, and Antonio was made aware of that familiar feeling of worry overtaking his senses. He had a thousand questions, and each one sat at the tip of his tongue, but he was able to reel himself in and instead asked:

"Have you had anything to eat?"

The subsequent shake of the head was no surprise to Antonio. Without a word, he began preparing the easiest dish that he could think of: spaghetti.

Pasta usually cheers him up. Antonio thought, hoping that he could at the very least wipe that dour look from his boyfriend's face.

The kitchen was plunged into a tense silence, broken only by the gentle bubbling of water on the stove. Antonio was dying to know what happened, and he would have asked, but he knew that look on Lovino's face — it was one that he dreaded.

His expression was twisted into a deeply contemplative look, his faraway gaze indicating that he was deep in thought. Antonio thought that he could shout, scream even, but Lovino would remain resolute. His eyes would not waver from the spot he had fixed them on, his mouth pressed into a firm line.

I hate when he gets like this. Something really bad must have happened.

While dissociation was something that he kept a lookout for with Feliciano, Lovino tended to fall into trance-like spells when something bad or overwhelming had happened. Antonio supposed that it was almost a defense mechanism, or maybe it was just a way for him to think clearly without distractions. Whatever it was, it was something that caused Lovino to zone out completely, and it was usually best just to wait it out.

The only problem was that Antonio *hated* waiting. Something was clearly wrong, and he wanted answers.

"Here, eat up." Antonio said tensely as he put the plate of spaghetti on the table.

It was robotic, the way that Lovino ate. It was systematic and uncaring, and completely driving Antonio nuts. He sat down heavily on the other side of the table and did his very best not to say anything. His efforts were admirable, but he couldn't keep from staring imploringly as Lovino ate.

"Take a picture, it'll last longer idiot." he snapped aggressively.

Antonio jumped at the sudden words, "Ah, sorry…"

Lovino sighed, looking down at the table, "If you want to say something, then just say it."

"Sorry." Antonio said again.

"And stop apologizing!" Lovino's eyes snapped up, a trace of his normal self returning.

"Sorr-" Antonio caught himself. He cleared his throat, "Um, is everything okay?"

Lovino snorted, "Fucking fantastic. Why were you and Feliciano on the couch this late?"

Avoiding the question. Antonio noted, not missing the way Lovino had put down his fork in favor of crossing his arms across his chest.

“He wanted to stay up and wait for you. I don’t blame him, those texts were pretty vague.” was Antonio’s simple answer.

Lovino huffed, “What was so vague about them? I said that I’d explain in the morning, and I will.”

“Explain what?” Antonio asked, leaning forward.

Lovino paled, “Like I said, I’ll explain in the morning.”

With a glance at the clock Antonio said cheekily, “It is morning.”

“You know what I mean, bastard!” Lovino glared.

Antonio sighed, “Lovi, you’re acting weird and something obviously happened. Why won’t you tell me?”

“I will, just not now.” Lovino said nervously.

“Why not? Maybe I could help.” Antonio pleaded.

“I don’t think so, just-”

“But why not?”

“It’s complicated, I can handle it.”

“But you don’t have to alone!”

“Toni, I swear to-”

“Stop being so stubborn! Seriously, this is the reason we fight so much now!”

“You wouldn't understand.”

“Then help me understand!”

“Goddammit, fine!” Lovino threw his hands up in exasperation.

Their little argument had ended up with both of them leaning forward in their seats. While they weren’t necessarily shouting, they were speaking loud enough that Lovino feared that he would wake his brother.

Antonio slumped back heavily in his chair, watching nervously as Lovino struggled to piece together an explanation. He did, after a time, and Antonio had to mask the look of horror that threatened to overtake his expression when he learned of the night’s events.

He felt vengeful when he found out that Lovino’s job was all but threatened. He felt sad that this man was a constant source of fear that just wouldn’t leave them alone. He was confused by Cristiano’s actions. But, more than anything, Antonio was just *angry.*

Lovino finished recounting the events, looking thoroughly exhausted by the time that he was done. Antonio noticed a few tears in the corners of his eyes as he finished weakly, “So that’s what happened, are you happy now?”

Antonio could only stare, feeling that familiar anger replace his own exhaustion. He wanted to launch out of his seat and do something. *Anything.*

He can’t just do this! That man is dead. I swear if I ever get my hands on him… Antonio thought darkly.

“Oi, are you gonna say anything useful or can I just go the fuck to bed already and forget this bullshit?” Lovino growled.

Antonio shook his head, trying to suppress his murderous fantasies, *“Lo siento,* Lovi. I just… I don’t understand.”

Lovino rolled his eyes, “Shocker.”

Antonio growled, the sound causing Lovino to jump in his chair. He suddenly launched out of his chair, pacing with no particular rhythm, “Why? I don’t get it!”

“I ask that every day.” Lovino said wearily.

Antonio felt helpless. He continued to pace, hands clenching angrily as he tried to figure out what to do next.

What can we do? There’s no way we could afford a lawyer, and Lovi would lose his mind if we lost Feli. Antonio thought about it before realizing that he would most definitely lose his mind right alongside Lovino if they lost this fight. They absolutely could not lose, but there was no way for them to win either.

“Fuck!” Antonio yelled, tangling his hands in his hair as he plopped back down in the chair. Lovino hadn’t moved the whole time, eyes becoming increasingly despondent. Antonio breathed heavily before he came down from his wrath, finally calm enough to say, “Okay, okay. Sorry, I’m good now.”

Lovino snorted, but didn’t look any less lost. He was obviously fighting to appear normal, like he wasn’t affected by this, but Antonio knew better. He saw the slight shake in his hands, and the way his eyes were still red-rimmed.

“Okay, so let’s say we can get a lawyer. You said that that guy was a social worker, right?” Antonio tried to reason.

Lovino nodded mutely.

“Good. Alright, we can work with that. We’re gonna have to go to court, but that’s fine. We have evidence and witnesses, and I’m sure Feli can testify…” Antonio listed off, trying to think of any other advantages in court they had.

“Antonio,” Lovino whispered.

“I could get another job maybe, that way there’s no doubt that we’re stable…”

“Antonio,” Lovino said just a little louder.

“Oh, and then we could also-”

“Toni!” Lovino yelled.

Antonio immediately froze, “Huh?”

“Just-” Lovino breathed in deeply, “Just stop. Please. We can talk about this tomorrow.”

“Oh, sorry.” Antonio mumbled sheepishly, realizing that he may have overwhelmed him. He stood, collecting the dishes just to distract himself when another thought came to him, “You’re going to tell Feli, right?”

Lovino sighed, fidgeting loosely with his hands before looking up sadly, “I promised I’d explain the texts.”

“But are you gonna tell him what happened?” Antonio pushed.

Lovino glared, “What do you want from me? If I tell him, he’ll freak out. That bastard doesn’t need another reason why I’m a terrible guardian!”

“Lovi, you’re not a terrible guardian. You’re doing your best.” Antonio tried to console.

“And what if my best isn’t enough? Listen, you know my brother, he’s not going to react well.” Lovino huffed, standing as his posture tensed in annoyance.

“Give him a little credit, he deserves to know what’s happening!” Antonio pushed, also standing just to maintain a height advantage so he could stare his obstinate boyfriend down.

“Dammit, Antonio, don’t you think I know that?” Lovino was visibly frustrated with himself, unable to find the correct words.

Antonio kept on pushing, “I don’t think you do! You act like he’s a kid, but he’s not anymore. If you keep him in the dark, what do you think is gonna happen later when he’s just thrown in a courtroom and asked God knows what about his personal life?”

Lovino groaned, “I know! But he doesn’t need to worry about this right now, it’s not fair to him.”

“Not telling him the truth isn’t fair either, but here you are trying to convince yourself that you’re right!” Antonio shouted, taking a swift step forward.

Lovino scrambled back with wide eyes, his anger forgotten as a brief flash of fear shot through his eyes.

Antonio froze, knowing that he just triggered a knee jerk reaction that had taken years to condition out of him. He felt sick, apology on his tongue, but Lovino was quickly back on the

offensive:

“You know what? Fuck this, fuck you, *fuck everything!”* he shouted aggressively. “I’m not telling him and that’s final. He’s emotionally unstable, immature, and would just get in the way!” Lovino kicked the chair, causing it to scrape shrilly against the floor.

Antonio glared, ready to correct Lovino on his mischaracterization of his brother when he heard a door slam closed.

They both whipped their heads up at the noise with wide, uncomprehending eyes. After a few seconds of processing, Antonio tore across the room and pulled the door open. His gaze was met with an empty hallway, all the air rushing from his lungs in realization.

“Shit!” Lovino yelled, already pulling his shoes on.

Antonio just stood, not believing that Feliciano had really fled the apartment. After another moment, he fumbled to pull out his phone and tried to call him, but was sent to voicemail. He tried again, only for the same result. Antonio hadn’t taken his phone like normal that night, but one glance in the living room confirmed that Feliciano had left his phone sitting on the couch.

“Stop standing there like a dumbass, let’s go!” Lovino yelled, trying to physically drag Antonio out the door. He let himself be dragged, and finally felt his consciousness drift back to him.

They ran down the hallway and flew down the stairs. Antonio had no idea where to even begin looking, but he decided to follow Lovino. Splitting up might have been more efficient, but after everything that had been happening, he was hesitant.

Lovino was yelling his brother’s name as well as apologies, but their search was proving pretty fruitless. It was the beginning of a long night, and their search was already bordering on frantic. Antonio prayed that Feliciano would be alright as he turned down another moonlit sidewalk in the dead silence of the night.

Chapter End Notes

I'm alive!

Woo, I'm finally moved after a looong fucking drive. It's good to be back.

Thanks so much for reading, here's a nice little cliffhanger to agonize over ;)

Hope you enjoyed this chapter, it's a bit shorter than what I've been writing lately, but whatevs.

Let me know what you think! Bless up, and have a good day/night.

'Till next time!

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano jerked awake in his bed, hearing some sort of commotion in the other room. It took him a moment of sitting dazedly to realize that it was Lovino and Antonio arguing in the kitchen. He kept his eyes closed, trying to listen. It was rare for him to be woken up from a dead sleep like this, but he was already overwrought and stressed and worried and a whole host of other unpleasant emotions that inhibited his ability to sleep.

The argument was growing louder, and Feliciano could hear some snippets of the muffled conversation drift through:

"Toni, I swear to-"

"Stop being so stubborn! Seriously, this is the reason we fight so much now!"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Then help me understand!"

"Goddammit, fine!"

Feliciano sucked in a breath, the shouting match making him nervous. The apartment grew silent once more, and it was obvious that Lovino was deliberately speaking in a hushed voice. With a sigh, he peeled his eyes open and crawled out of bed. He'd never changed into his pyjamas, he realized with some surprise.

Oh that's right, I fell asleep on the couch.

Feliciano slipped out of his room in silence, padding down the hallway to crouch down in his usual spot around the corner of the kitchen where he would be concealed by the shadows. When before he might have felt shame for eavesdropping, now he only felt exasperation.

If nobody wants to tell me what's going on, fine. I'll find out for myself.

It truly felt like he was being left out of the loop. Lovino has clearly been edgy lately, and stressed out way more than what was warranted. Stubborn as he was, there was no way that Feliciano could force an explanation out of his obstinate brother. Sometimes he could dig the truth out of Antonio, but he seemed just as confused as Feliciano did — that worried him more than anything.

As Feliciano settled down more comfortably on the ground, he listened as Lovino wrapped up what must have been some sort of lengthy explanation:

"So that's what happened, are you happy now?"

Feliciano listened for a response, for anything that would clue him in to what had just been said, but as he peeked around the corner, he could see Antonio stare blankly ahead. It was uncharacteristic of the cheerful Spaniard to look on with such dead eyes.

Lovino must have gotten fed up, "Oi, are you gonna say anything useful or can I just go the fuck to bed already and forget this bullshit?"

"Lo siento, Lovi. I just… I don't understand."

"Shocker."

And just like that, Antonio was out of his seat and pacing the kitchen. Feliciano watched in astonishment as Antonio clenched his hands in what was presumably anger.

"Why? I don't get it!" he yelled in frustration.

"I ask that every day."

Lovino sounded bone-weary. The exhaustion in his voice alone ran far deeper than just a lack of sleep. No, this sort of exhaustion drilled down to the soul. It was a dangerous thing, and Lovino seemed to be suffering the effects.

I know he doesn't sleep, but just what is stressing him out so bad? Feliciano thought, wanting more than anything to help.

"Fuck!" Antonio suddenly shouted, causing Feliciano to jump. He peeked around the corner again and saw Antonio breathing heavily as he tangled his hands in his hair before plopping back down in his seat.

There were several tense seconds of silence. Feliciano leaned his head against the wall as he waited for a response, his eyes drifting closed when the silence only persisted. It was awfully late, and even though he was invested in the argument, he knew that it wouldn't take much for him to fall back asleep.

Antonio was apologizing, and Feliciano kept his eyes shut. He thought that might be the end of the conversation when Antonio took a deep breath and said:

"Okay, so let's say we can get a lawyer. You said that that guy was a social worker, right?"

What?

Feliciano was wracking his brain as to why they would need a lawyer, and what in the hell a social worker of all things had to do with anything. In the kitchen, the conversation continued:

"Good. Alright, we can work with that. We're gonna have to go to court, but that's fine. We have evidence and witnesses, and I'm sure Feli can testify…"

Feliciano's eyes blew wide open at that.

Evidence? Witnesses? Why would I testify in court?

Feliciano's head whirled with the information. He vaguely heard Lovino shout Antonio's name before the argument died down. The kitchen had descended into silence once more, and Feliciano was left with even more questions than before.

After the silence dragged on for minutes, Feliciano began to consider just creeping silently back into his room. But, just as he was about to get up, he heard Antonio speak once more:

"You're going to tell Feli, right?"

Tell me what?

"I promised I'd explain the texts."

Feliciano shook his head to himself.

No you didn't, you said you would explain what happened.

"But are you gonna tell him what happened?" Antonio asked.

Feliciano leaned forward, waiting with bated breath for Lovino's answer.

"What do you want from me? If I tell him, he'll freak out. That bastard doesn't need another reason why I'm a terrible guardian!" was the disappointing response.

So he was never going to tell me? Feliciano felt a pang in his chest. He felt betrayed and hurt that he was once again left out.

"Lovi, you're not a terrible guardian. You're doing your best."

"And what if my best isn't enough? Listen, you know my brother, he's not going to react well."

"Give him a little credit, he deserves to know what's happening!"

"Dammit, Antonio, don't you think I know that?"

Feliciano tried to keep up with the argument as it grew steadily louder. The shouting made his heart beat faster, and his palms were growing sweaty. He wanted to escape, but he was also desperate to find out what was being hidden from him. Feliciano didn't like the insinuation his brother was making about him, like he was something fragile that couldn't handle the truth.

"I don't think you do! You act like he's a kid, but he's not anymore. If you keep him in the dark, what do you think is gonna happen later when he's just thrown in a courtroom and asked God knows what about his personal life?" Antonio shot back.

Feliciano had started nodding his head in agreement, when the second half of Antonio's response registered.

Are we going to court? What happened? Why do they need to ask me questions?

The frustration that he was feeling was only growing worse, and Feliciano had half a mind to storm into the kitchen and demand answers. He scowled, an expression that was unfamiliar to him. Feliciano silently stood with clenched fists, but he managed to hold onto what little patience he had left and continued to listen.

“I know! But he doesn’t need to worry about this right now, it’s not fair to him.”

“Not telling him the truth isn’t fair either, but here you are trying to convince yourself that you’re right!” Antonio shouted.

“You know what? Fuck this, fuck you, *fuck everything!* I’m not telling him and that’s final! He’s emotionally unstable, immature, and would just get in the way!”

That was it.

Feliciano dashed across the room towards the door. He wasn’t even noticed as he scooped his shoes up, wrenched open the door, and slammed it behind him.

He sprinted through the hallway and down the stairs faster than he’d ever run before. Tears of frustration and anger were starting to blur his vision as he emerged from the stairwell and into the lobby. Feliciano quickly yanked his shoes on as he exited the apartment building. He tore down the moonlit sidewalks, having no destination in mind. It was like he was trying to outrun the hurt, to escape the betrayal that he was feeling.

Is that really what Lovino thinks about me? Am I just in the way?

It was like his brother had specifically chosen the words that would cut the deepest, playing on his greatest insecurity: that he was a burden.

Feliciano turned down an alleyway, his lungs burning and heart racing. Those tears flowed down his cheeks like rivulets, but he didn’t care. He was quickly getting lost, but he didn’t care. The anger was fading to hurt, but he didn’t care. The buildings were quickly turning dilapidated, and the sidewalks were overgrown, *but he didn’t care.*

Finally he felt the effects of his run catch up to him. Feliciano came to a stop, leaning over with his hands on his knees. After a few moments of trying to catch his breath, he looked up. He had to wipe the tears away before he could see clearly.

Feliciano was in the middle of an older part of the city. Many of the buildings were rundown, the brick crumbling in places and many of the windows chipped or scuffed. It was a marvel that he didn’t trip on the sidewalk, as it was cracked and overtaken by weeds. Graffiti marked almost every wall or streetlight, and it was with a start that Feliciano realized that he was definitely not in the safest environment.

He started walking forward, hoping to find a way out of the predicament he was in. As it was pretty late, the streets were almost deserted — a fact didn’t make Feliciano feel any less

nervous. He patted at his pockets for his phone, his heart sinking when he found it wasn't there.

I left it in the apartment. Of course I did. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Feliciano kicked at the ground as he contemplated his next action. There were no notable landmarks around him, or businesses he felt comfortable enough approaching to ask for help. His head swiveled, desperate to spot something that may assist him out of this situation.

His head snapped to the side when he heard a clatter of noise drifting from the building to his immediate right. The cacophonous mix of drunken laughter and rock music caused Feliciano to cringe. The establishment was obviously a dive-bar, and there just so happened to be a sizable group of men leaving — swaying and hiccuping as they ambled out the doors.

Feliciano edged away, not wanting to ask for help from people who were obviously too inebriated to talk properly. It was just his luck, fate even, that one of the men singled him out.

"Hey! You gotta light?" one of the men shouted, voice rough as gravel.

Feliciano simply put his head down and tried to speed by. However, the man must not have been as drunk as he had originally thought. His words didn't quite slur, and he was surefooted.

"Oi, don't ignore me, punk." he took a few quick steps forward and gripped Feliciano's arm, spinning him around to face him.

His breath caught in his throat. Staring back at him were two cold, familiar amber eyes.

The man was big, an unlit cigarette held loosely in his mouth. Along the underside of his jaw was a long scar, his features a bit softer since the last time Felicano had seen him.

Of all the people that could have been out, it just had to be him, the man that had caused so much pain and misery in his life. Fate must have been smiling savagely down on Feliciano that night to have put Cristiano Valenti in front of him.

Cristiano froze, simply staring at the frozen teen in disbelief. Slowly, a smile creeped onto his face, and it wasn't long before he burst out laughing, "No way. What are the fucking odds?" He plucked the cigarette out of his mouth, lest it drop from his disgustingly fake white teeth, "Who would've thought I would see both my sons on the same night!"

Both? Does that mean he saw Lovi?

Feliciano was still frozen, terror holding him hostage. He flinched when the man clapped a heavy hand on his shoulder. The action was carried out familiarly, like this was just a normal interaction between father and son.

"This is perfect, I was meaning to have a word with you." he said as he began steering Feliciano down the street.

Feliciano could only follow numbly, unable to control his actions as he was fully gripped by the realization that his father was there, and had apparently spoken with his brother.

Is this what Lovi's been hiding from me?

"How've you been? Seriously, it's been too long." Cristiano smiled down at him, and if Feliciano didn't know any better, he'd say that the question was sincere.

He remained silent, staring blankly up at Cristiano's saccharine smile.

"C'mon, you're usually impossible to shut up!" the words were emphasized with a painful squeeze to his shoulder.

Feliciano squeaked, nodding his head furiously in response. The numbness was wearing away, and everything in him was screaming for him to run. If not for the tight grip around his shoulders, he would have.

The man sighed, "Did Roma forget to teach you manners before he keeled over? I asked a question, I expect an answer."

The words were cruel, and Feliciano felt a knife twist in his gut at the reminder of his beloved grandfather's death. They continued to walk down the sidewalk as Feliciano fought for his voice, "Lovi…?"

"Hmm?"

"You talked to Lovi?" he was finally able to get out.

A flash of annoyance crossed Cristiano's face before he brought the smile back up, "Yeah, earlier tonight. We had a nice talk, got to catch up and everything. Did he not tell you?"

Feliciano glared at the ground, "No, he didn't."

Perhaps sensing the resentment, Cristiano dug in a little more, "Really? I thought you two were close."

Me too.

"Well, if you wanted to know, I just stopped by to apologize." Cristiano said softly

Feliciano's head snapped up, disbelief written all over his face.

"It's true! Lovino will deny it I'm sure — he was always so spiteful. All I wanted was to talk to you, but your brother's pride wouldn't allow it." Cristiano exaggerated the sadness in his voice, attempting to come off as genuine.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Feliciano asked with wide eyes.

"Of course! I want to apologize for not stepping in sooner. Lovino was never supposed to be your guardian, and I hate to see you burden him unnecessarily."

Feliciano looked down in shame, the words striking a chord within him. After all, Lovino had said it himself that he was in the way. A burden. Tears threatened to fall once more.

“Hey, it’s alright. Here,” Cristiano reached in his pocket and pulled out a napkin that was probably from the bar. Feliciano accepted it, uneasy with the friendliness.

They walked on silently, Feliciano still tense. While the words seemed genuine, something still didn’t sit right with the way his father spoke. It was too measured, and Feliciano couldn’t forget what this man had done to both him and his brother.

“So how has it been living on your own? I’m sure the real world is treating you two kindly.” Cristiano said, smirking like he already knew the answer to his question.

“Um, fine I think.” was the subdued response.

“And your brother?” Cristiano prompted.

Feliciano drew in a shaky breath, “He’s doing his best.”

Cristiano shook his head with a small sigh, “That’s what I was afraid of.”

“Huh?” Feliciano looked up.

“I’m sorry to say this, but I don’t know if I’m comfortable with you staying with Lovino any longer.”

“What?” Feliciano asked in shock. While he still felt hurt and betrayed by his brother, he didn’t want to leave him. They were the only family they had left, and sure they fought but it didn’t mean Feliciano hated him.

“Look at you,” Cristiano gestured to the teen’s slight frame, “I don’t think he’s been feeding you properly.”

“That’s not his fault, it-”

“I dare say this is borderline neglect. And he does have rather… violent tendencies.” Cristiano rubbed the scar he had underneath his chin with a glare, “Are you sure you’re safe with him?”

Feliciano nodded with all the sincerity he could muster, “Lovi would never hurt me!”

“Of course, but what about that Antonio? He sounds like he gets angry pretty easily, he even threatened me!” Cristiano smirked, apparently unconcerned with the ‘threat.’

The terror that he’d momentarily forgotten came crashing back as soon as Feliciano saw that smirk, “Toni wouldn’t hurt me either!”

“How about this, just come back to Italy with me and this can all stop.” he said, loosening his grip.

The offer hit Feliciano like a ton of bricks.

Go back to Italy? With him?

“Why?” he asked shakily.

“Why? Because you’re my son!” Cristiano cried, back to acting like the parent he never was. “I know you’re struggling. I know Lovino’s struggling. It must be so hard to support someone like you.”

“Like me?”

“Y’know,” he waved his hand vaguely in the air, “someone that’s messed up. You’re emotional, loud, immature, and generally just a weight to have to carry. I should know, I had to raise you!” Cristiano laughed like he’d just told a particularly funny joke.

Feliciano’s face went blank, thinking that his words echoed Lovino’s from earlier that night.

‘He’s emotionally unstable, immature, and would just get in the way!’

“But I’m willing to forgive you. Just come back with me, I know you miss your home.” Cristiano pushed.

Feliciano didn’t know what to think. This was the man who had driven their mother away, threatened them, hurt them. He still had scars, many of them actually. Feliciano did his best to forget they were there, and most of the time it worked. But now he was remembering why he left Italy, why his subconsciousness was still screaming at him to *get away.*

With a shaky breath, Feliciano began the process of twisting out of the grip around his shoulders, “Maybe you can forgive me, but I can’t forgive you!”

“Don’t be that way, think about it.” Cristiano growled, tightening his hold around the younger. “You’re just a burden to your brother, just let him go.”

Feliciano shook his head, “That may be true, but at least he cares about me!”

“And you’re sure about that?” Cristiano asked lightly.

Feliciano paused in his attempts to get away, peering up with a fierce glare, “Yes. Lovi and Toni are my family.”

“I’m afraid that’s not what Lovino said to me.” Cristiano said with a sigh, looking up like he was deep in thought.

“What are you talking about?” Feliciano asked, glare still firmly in place.

Cristiano shrugged, “When I told him I was willing to take you off his hands, he looked so relieved. Honestly, it’s probably only his pride that’s caused him to put up with you for this long.”

Feliciano's glare softened as he took in the words.

"I'm sure Antonio feels the same way. How old is he? Twenty-one? He should be out living his life, not being held hostage by someone he's not even related to." Cristiano dug in.

They don't feel that way, he's lying! Feliciano thought, but there was also a spark of doubt. It was true, in a sense he was holding them back. But Lovino didn't actually resent him for it… right?

"I'm sorry. Really, I am. It must feel pretty bad realizing that they never cared about you at all." Cristiano said sympathetically.

Unpleasant thoughts raced through Feliciano's mind. Lovino had been keeping secrets from him, could this be it?

'What do you want from me? If I tell him, he'll freak out!' Lovino had said.

Well, Feliciano was certainly freaking out now. Too many dots were connecting in his brain.

'Listen, you know my brother, he's not going to react well.'

'He deserves to know what's happening!'

It was hard not to jump to conclusions. His brother always tried to do everything himself, never asking for help. Why would it be any different in asking for help to get rid of him? Maybe it would be a kindness to leave, go back to Italy and let Antonio and Lovino get on with their lives.

But I don't want to.

And therein lay the problem. Feliciano had made a new life here. He had friends, a job, even a new relationship, and he'd be damned if he let that all go now. Sure, he may be a little messed up, but who wasn't? He would confront his brother about things later, but right now, getting the hell away from this man was much more important than lingering on his insecurities.

"You're wrong." Feliciano mumbled.

"What was that?"

Feliciano pushed the doubt to the back of his head, choosing to stew on what he was told later. Despite the guilt that he's always held about holding Lovino and Antonio back, he didn't believe that his brother would give him up so easily. It was like Cristiano had forgotten all the years that he had hurt them, like Feliciano was stupid enough to simply forgive and forget. Anger now coursed through his veins, driving him to start pulling out of his father's grasp.

"I said, you're wrong!" he yelled, trying to twist away.

Cristiano held firm, “Are you trying to convince me or yourself? You’re living in denial if you think they would care about someone like you. Listen, just come back to Italy and you can free your brother.” He tried to sound reasonable, like what he was saying wasn’t totally ludicrous, “His pride won’t let him give you up, but if you leave then he’ll be so grateful! The longer you stay, the more he’ll hate you.”

Feliciano didn’t respond, instead trying to wrench himself more desperately from the hold his father had around his shoulders. He was surprised when Cristiano released him, only to grab his upper arm in a fierce grip.

“Like I said, think about it.” Cristiano hissed as he squeezed his hand, digging his fingers into the back of Feliciano’s arm where they both knew he still had those old, ugly scars.

“No, I don’t wanna!” Feliciano yelled, trying desperately to rip his arm free.

The grip on his arm suddenly vanished, and he went crashing harshly into the ground. Feliciano groaned in pain, immediately shrinking away when a large figure hovered menacingly over him, “You could’ve made this easy, but you’re just the same as always. Ungrateful.” Cristiano shook his head in disappointment, “I expected better. My offer still stands, and I suggest you take it. I don’t think your *family* can afford a legal fight.”

He spat the word ‘family’ like it burned his tongue before backing away. Feliciano didn’t know what he meant, but he guessed the talk about a legal fight had something to do with what Antonio and his brother were fighting about earlier.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t raise you to be better, but it can’t be helped now. We’ll have to work on your manners when you come home.” And, as if he hadn’t been physically restraining Feliciano moments before, he left. All of that intensity, his adamant attempts at convincing him to leave, just gone. He waved as he sauntered off, not sparing a look as Feliciano sat confused on the ground, “See you soon, *ciao.”*

It wasn’t until Cristiano had disappeared from view did Feliciano move. He stood on shaky feet looking at the spot where his father had left. He was under a streetlamp in the dead of night, the faint hum of electricity his only company.

There was a payphone across the street, and Feliciano moved dumbly towards it. The interaction had felt like a dream and he wasn’t fully convinced that it really happened.

He was here, right by me. Right?

The only evidence he has was the dull throb in his arm, where he’d been gripped rather viciously mere minutes before.

So it was real.

Feliciano sucked in a breath, the beginnings of a full-blown anxiety attack beginning to take root.

Dio that actually happened.

He had no idea how he managed to stay this calm thus far, but his mask was crumbling away. In all honesty, he'd been terrified the entire time. Feliciano brought a hand up and covered his eyes as he made it to the payphone, leaning heavily against it as tears trailed down his cheeks. His breathing sped up, and every sense screamed at him that he was in danger even though the threat had passed.

Feliciano gasped, understanding that this was a delayed response. As a child he had gotten pretty good at hiding his panic, only breaking when the danger was gone. It was a defense mechanism, and one that he relied on in order to not shut down in moments where his full and careful attention was needed.

Lovi… I have to call Lovi.

He wanted to launch into action at the thought, but first he tried to get a hold of the hyperventilation that was making him woozy. He practiced the breathing exercises he'd been taught, trying to counteract the impending panic attack, but it was quickly proving useless.

Feliciano dug around in his pocket for change, his shaky hands not doing much to help in that endeavor. Finally, he was able to find enough coins and he shoved them in the slot. He brought the phone to his ear and reached up to punch in Lovino's number-

Wait, what's his number again?

He froze.

Currently, Feliciano's panic-addled brain could scarcely remember how to breathe, let alone recall his brother's phone number. Unfortunately, the more he tried to remember, the more he panicked until he was actually crying in despair.

"Dammit!" he yelled in frustration.

Feliciano's heart hammered painfully against his chest, his vision fuzzy around the edges. His mind was in overdrive, but somewhere in his head he remembered something — it wasn't Lovino's number, but it was something that could help.

He'd never changed before he was put to bed, so it was with little thought that he reached back down in his pocket and retrieved the business card Gilbert had given him earlier that night.

He fumbled with the card as he tried to hold his hands still enough so he could punch in the number. There were two of them listed, so Feliciano tried the one that looked more likely to be a cellphone number.

The phone rang and Feliciano started biting at his nails.

Finally, an answer, *"Hallo?"*

Feliciano almost fainted at the relief he felt, "Gil, please help me."

"Feli, what's wrong? Are you alright?" he asked, sounding instantly more alert.

Feliciano shook his head even though he knew Gilbert couldn't see him, "Help, p-please." It was getting harder to speak, his breathing not cooperating with him at all.

"Okay, where are you? Do you need me to come get you?" he asked just a bit frantically.

"I-I, uh…" Feliciano looked around desperately for a landmark, any indication as to where he was. Luckily, he happened to be by a street sign, "Olive A-v-venue. There's a b-bar." was all he managed to choke out. He sank down to the floor, putting his head between his knees as he cradled the phone delicately to his ear.

"Olive Avenue. Bar. Got it." Gilbert said, the jingling of keys accompanying his words.

Feliciano choked on a sob, trying to calm himself down.

Why is he here? Is it true what he said about Lovi? Does he really hate me?

He'd been able to push those questions away, too focused on the confrontation to give any real thought to them. But now that he was alone, it was all he could do not to let his traitorous mind wander. On a base level, he agreed with what his father said. While Feliciano truly didn't want to leave, nor did he really think his brother hated him or wanted him gone, it was hard not to humor his anxiety and it was especially hard not to think about these things in the midst of a panic attack.

"Hey Feli, you still with me?" Gilbert's voice cut through.

Feliciano wordlessly groaned by way of response. There was no way he could give a verbal answer, and he was beginning to shake so hard that he feared that he would lose his grip on the phone.

"Okay, just deep breaths. I'll be there in ten minutes, you think you can hold on 'till then?" Gilbert asked.

A few tears dripped onto the ground below as he nodded his head, giving a hum in affirmation which came out as more of a strangled cry.

Gilbert stayed on the phone with him the entire time, updating Feliciano to his whereabouts. He didn't ask anymore questions, which Feliciano greatly appreciated. He probably wouldn't have been able to answer anyway.

Unbidden thoughts raced through his mind. It was a jumbled mess of fear and confusion. He had flashes of his past, of searing pain and biting words. He still carried the evidence of the abuse on his skin and in his head — those awful scars being a physical manifestation, while the anxiety that plagued him served as the mental damage.

Roma had helped him heal, to become a new person free from the burdens of his past. He hadn't recovered entirely, but he had been in the process. But now it felt like all that progress was being obliterated, and all it took was one interaction, mere minutes of conversation. Now Feliciano questioned everything: his progress, his brother, and worst of all, himself.

Finally, a car rolled up and screeched to a halt along the curb. Gilbert tore down the sidewalk, the streetlight reflecting oddly off his pale skin and crisp white hair. He looked around wildly for Feliciano, whose voice was still nonfunctioning. But Gilbert spotted him anyway, crouched down in the phonebooth, as he sprinted over.

“Feli!” he knelt before him, noticing the way he still shook and was unable to get control of his breathing. “Listen, you’re having a panic attack. Can you take some deep breaths for me?”

Feliciano tried, really he did. But his throat constricted painfully, and his lungs spasmed, causing him to choke on the air. It didn’t help that an occasional sob would work its way through.

“Okay, that’s fine. How about we count down from one hundred, *ja?* I’ll even help.” Gilbert said decisively.

Feliciano nodded, willing to try anything if it meant putting an end to this suffocating feeling.

“Alright then, I’ll start: One hundred, ninety-nine, ninety-eight…” he began, saying each number slowly and clearly.

He was able to jump in somewhere in the seventies. They counted together, and Feliciano felt his breathing start to calm down around fifty. The shaking stopped when he reached twenty-five, and by the time they reached ten he was no longer crying.

“...four, three, two, one.” they finished in unison.

Feliciano sat in silence, finally able to breathe normally. Gilbert watched him carefully, “Good, you did great.”

At the subsequent nod, Gilbert stood up, “Normally I wouldn’t rush you to do anything after that, but we should really get out of here.”

With a jerk, Feliciano realized that they were still in a rather sketchy area. He wanted to get up, but he was absolutely exhausted. He doubted he could lift a finger, let alone stand.

“Are you alright if I touch you?” Gilbert asked, most likely sensing his physical and mental fatigue.

Feliciano nodded, his eyes bleary. Gilbert reached down and pulled him gently into a standing position. He looped one of Feliciano’s arms around his shoulders and half-dragged him to his car.

Now sitting in the passenger seat of Gilbert’s car for the second time that night, Feliciano let himself curl up. He could fall asleep right then and there, and he intended to, but Gilbert’s voice kept him awake, “Do you know how to get home from here? ‘Cause I’m gonna need some directions.”

Home.

Suddenly, Feliciano felt a lot more awake.

Oh God, Lovi's going to be so mad!

He was scared of the reaction he was going to get, that lingering doubt still plaguing his mind. He began to hyperventilate in his seat as he thought about facing his brother.

"Hey, I need you to breathe! C'mon, you can do it." Gilbert encouraged, having no idea what set him off.

Feliciano sucked in air through his nose, and released it shakily out his mouth. After a few more repetitions, he felt his breathing even out. He turned to Gilbert meekly, "Sorry."

"It's alright, dude. But seriously, we need to get you home."

Feliciano shook his head, "No."

"No?" Gilbert asked in astonishment.

"I can't go back right now, please don't make me!" he cried, voice scratchy from his earlier crying.

"Woah, woah! Hey, it's fine." Gilbert soothed. "I'm not going to make you do anything. But, um, what about your brother? Won't he be worried?"

Will he?

Feliciano was confused. He felt like he had been living a lie, and that everything Cristiano had said was true. On the other hand, he had faith in his brother and didn't think he would really want to get rid of him. His chest hurt as he fought with himself, trying to figure out the truth.

"Please, I don't wanna go home right now." Feliciano whispered, unable to properly deal with these conflicting emotions.

Gilbert sighed heavily, running a hand through his hair, "I really shouldn't, you know. Your brother would have my head."

Feliciano looked at him with a watery expression, giving him the most pathetic puppy eyes he could muster.

It must have worked because Gilbert groaned loudly, "Dammit, fine! But you're calling your brother as soon as we get back and telling him where you are."

"Deal." Feliciano said, relieved at the compromise. Talking on the phone with Lovino he could handle, but the thought of standing before him and searching his eyes for resentment terrified him. He was scared he would find hatred, although a part of him told him that such a thought was ridiculous.

Tomorrow. I'll ask him about everything tomorrow.

Feliciano settled more comfortably, resting his head against the car window. His eyes drooped shut as he consciously put a wall around his thoughts. He refused to thing about anything for the rest of the night, instead opting to shut down entirely.

Gil still hasn't asked what happened. He thought curiously. Although he appreciated it, he knew there was a lengthy interrogation in store for him.

Tomorrow.

With a sigh, Feliciano shut off. He had felt too many emotions that night, all of them negative. He was entirely overwhelmed, and he wished he could sleep for a thousand years. Maybe then he wouldn't have to face the fallout of tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Here's 6,000 words of pure suffering.

Lol, for real this was a lot and I need to sleep but I felt like that little cliffhanger went long enough.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! Shit guys, it's all going down and I am so hype. I have a plan and everything, woo.

Let me know what you think! I'm interested to hear where y'all think this is going.

Here's to lots of love and happiness (unlike this story, YEET).

'Till next time!

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Gilbert had given Feliciano his business card, he hadn't expected to be called so soon. He'd just layed down, intent on finally getting some sleep after a long night when he received the call. Luckily, Gilbert had been to the bar on the very street Feliciano was on so finding him hadn't posed much of a challenge. When he did find him curled up in a phone booth of all things (apparently those still exist) Gilbert was instantly thankful he had the foresight to give him his number.

Why the hell was he all the way out there by himself?

Gilbert pondered that, sparing a glance over to where Feliciano had fallen asleep in his car. He'd been in a terrible state, lost in the throes of a panic attack. The brief conversation he had shared with Lovino told Gilbert enough to know that he was *extremely* protective of his little brother, and there was no way he would have let Feliciano wander the streets alone at night.

He must have run then.

That perplexed Gilbert further. Feliciano wasn't the type to just up and leave. Something must have driven him away, and the way he had begged not to go home indicated that something was very, *very* wrong.

With a sigh, Gilbert drove on in silence. Although he wanted to ask what had happened, he knew that Feliciano was too overwhelmed to answer him. While he had his suspicions about what, or rather *who,* was responsible for inspiring such an intense reaction out of the little Italian, Gilbert couldn't be sure.

He pulled up to his apartment building and parked along the street, Feliciano remaining peacefully asleep throughout it all. Gilbert knew that he had to wake him up, but it didn't make him feel any less guilty, "Hey, Feli."

Feliciano groaned, scrunching his nose up in annoyance. Gilbert leaned over his seat and reached a hand out, shaking his shoulder as he said firmly, "I need you to wake up."

With a small gasp, Feliciano jerked awake. He looked around wildly, most likely trying to pinpoint the threat. Gilbert backed off immediately, putting his hands up in a position of surrender, "It's cool man, it's just me."

Gilbert watched as Feliciano's wide amber eyes snapped to meet his own. He looked confused, his exhausted brain slowly trying to process where he was. Gilbert sat silently, trying to appear as non-threatening as he could.

Finally a spark of recognition, "Gil?"

With a soft smile, Gilbert nodded, “The one and only.”

Feliciano looked around, his posture relaxing incrementally. When Gilbert was confident that he was lucid enough to process his words he said, “Okay, we’re at my apartment now. Ready to go?”

“Why are we at…” Something dawned on Feliciano as the events from the night must have registered in his brain. His eyes blew open wide, and his breathing was once again picking up, “That happened. *Dio* it was real!” He brought his hands to his face, and Gilbert was alarmed to note that he had gone white as a sheet.

“Hey, it’s alright! Everything's gonna be fine. Deep breaths, okay?” Gilbert said as calmly as he could manage.

Feliciano nodded, doing as he was told. Thankfully, he didn’t work himself up into another panic attack, but Gilbert remained wary when his face went completely blank. He stared at a fixed point ahead, and while Gilbert hadn’t known the teen for very long, he did know that this was extremely unnatural. It was unnerving to see all the energy sap out of him as his eyes clouded over.

“Feli? Hey, can you look at me?’ Gilbert asked, but he didn’t receive any kind of response.

Dissociation, supplied Gilbert’s brain. He had seen it before during some of his cases. It was a defense mechanism that could change someone’s personality like a switch, and it was extremely jarring to witness firsthand.

“Okay, you don’t have to talk to me right now, but I do need you to unbuckle your seatbelt so we can get out of the car. You think you can do that?” Gilbert asked carefully.

Feliciano was still detached, but somewhere his brain must have registered the words because he did as he was told.

“Awesome. Alright, I’ll be right back.” Gilbert said as he whipped his door open and exited the car. He made his way to the passenger side and opened the door, “Alright so you’re going to have to walk, do you need help?”

Feliciano shook his head and stood up. Gilbert would have carried him, as he was looking far too exhausted to really function, but he didn’t want to trigger a reaction.

“Just follow me dude.” Gilbert said as brightly as he could manage, leading the despondent Feliciano into the building and through the lobby.

After a silent ride in the elevator, Gilbert unlocked the door to his apartment. Ludwig was still blessedly asleep (Gilbert had no idea how he could have explained why he had a completely dissociated Feliciano with him).

Shit, we still need to call Lovino.

While Gilbert had no idea what had happened between the two brothers, he did know that it would be downright cruel to withhold the whereabouts of Feliciano from his brother.

But he's in no shape to call him right now.

He looked at where Feliciano stood unresponsive in the doorway. He wasn't exactly sure what to do, but getting the teen to sleep off this withdrawn state was probably the best option. With that in mind, he directed Feliciano to take off his shoes and lay down on the couch. He did so willingly, the utter apathy he exhibited physically hurt Gilbert to watch.

"Okay so I know I told you that you don't have to talk, but I *really* need to know you brother's phone number." Gilbert said as he sat at the end of the couch.

Predictably, Feliciano didn't respond. Gilbert's foot began tapping on the ground as he tried to figure out what to do. In a wild gamble, he decided to push his phone into Feliciano's hands, "If you can hear me then please help me out here. I won't make you talk to him, but you need to at least give me a number."

Gilbert hadn't expected it to work. It was a desperate shot in the dark, but to his astonishment, Feliciano began to punch a number in. He did it robotically, and it was likely that he wasn't aware of his actions and that he was only doing as he was told.

Finally, he handed the phone back to Gilbert. He breathed a sigh of relief as he immediately hit the call button.

It only rang for a few seconds before a distraught voice came over the line, "Feli?"

"Close, but no."

"Loudmouth? Why the hell are you calling me?" Lovino asked, the biting words not matching his exhausted voice.

Gilbert's foot tapped anxiously as he ran his hand through his hair, "I have Feliciano here with me."

"You do?! Where? Is he alright?" Lovino practically shouted over the phone.

"*Ja,* he's…" Gilbert glanced over to Feliciano who was still laying down with those dead eyes, "...he's okay. He called me and asked me to pick him up. We're at my apartment."

"O-okay," Lovino said dubiously. "Can I talk to him?"

Gilbert shook his head to himself, not sure how to break the news that *no, Feliciano won't even acknowledge his surroundings.* He decided on telling the truth, "Um, I'm not sure if that's a good idea."

"And why the hell not?" Lovino growled, unhappy at being denied.

"Well," Gilbert began nervously, "do you know what dissociation is?"

The line went silent.

"Lovino? You still there?"

“He dissociated?’ Lovino asked hollowly.

Gilbert sighed, “Yeah, I can’t get him to talk and I’m not sure if he even knows where he is.”

“*Dammit!”* Lovino yelled, “Where do you live? I’m coming to get him.”

Gilbert didn’t respond right away, trying to think this situation through.

Lovino has every right to take him home, but I promised Feli I wouldn’t make him go.

Gilbert didn’t know what happened, or why Feliciano was so desperate not to go back. But he had made a promise, and he intended to keep it, “I’m sorry, but Feli doesn’t want to go home right now.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Lovino asked in disbelief.

“No, I promised I wouldn’t make him go back.” It pained Gilbert to do this as he knew how much Lovino cared. But a promise was a promise, and if Feliciano wasn’t comfortable with going home, then dammit he wasn’t going to force him to.

“And I don’t give a shit!” Lovino exploded, “You better tell me where you live *right fucking now,* or you and I are going to have a serious problem, bastard!”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened, but he doesn’t want to go home right now.”

“I don’t give a fuck what he wants!” Lovino screeched.

Gilbert was about to respond, to tell Lovino that he wasn’t considering Feliciano’s feelings when he heard a commotion on the other end of the line. It sounded like the phone was being wrestled out of Lovino’s hold, and the sound of muffled cursing was interrupted by a new voice.

“Hi, sorry about him. Is Feliciano safe?”

“*Ja,* he’s fine, just a little shaken up.” Gilbert said, wondering who this new person was.

There was a sigh, “Good. I’m Antonio by the way. I’m guessing you’re the social worker guy Lovi was talking about?”

“That’s me. The name’s Gilbert.” he said with some of his usual attitude.

“It’s nice to meet you. Now can you please tell us what’s going on?” Antonio asked impatiently.

Gilbert would love to tell him, but he had absolutely no idea what the events were that led up to the frantic phone call, “I don’t know man, when I found him he was having a panic attack. I brought him back to my place and he’s totally unresponsive.” He spared another glance at Feliciano, noting the way the teen had curled tightly up on the couch.

“Shit, okay. Um, can you tell us where you are so we can come get him?” Antonio pleaded.

With another sigh Gilbert said, “Look, I really don’t know what’s wrong, but Feli asked if he could stay at my place tonight. I told him I wouldn’t force him to go home.”

He expected a reaction similar to Lovino’s, but was surprised when all Antonio said was, “Oh.”

There was some more rustling, and Gilbert thought he heard Antonio say something angrily in Spanish before Lovino was back on the phone.

“Do you promise you’ll let me get him tomorrow?” he asked desperately.

Gilbert nodded his head solemnly, “I swear it. He’ll be safe with me, and I’ll have him call you first thing in the morning.”

There was a shaky intake of breath on the other end of the line, and Gilbert realized that Lovino must really be struggling with this decision, “Fine, but you better be telling the truth.”

“Of course, I promise I’ll keep him safe.”

There was nothing but heavy breathing for a few more tense seconds. Finally Lovino said, “Tell him I’m sorry, and that I’m going to explain everything to him. I promise.”

“I will.” Gilbert said despite not knowing what that meant.

Once again, his response was met by silence, and Gilbert was afraid he’d been hung up on when a whispered voice mumbled, “Thank you.”

The line went dead.

Gilbert set his phone down and drug a hand down his face. He turned on his heel and retrieved a blanket from his room, draping it across Feliciano when he returned. He was now fully asleep, the horrible lifelessness no longer so unnatural.

Thank God, I don’t know if I could stand the apathy any longer.

Gilbert had half a mind to retire himself, but he knew he had some work to do. It was obvious that there was a very real threat that Feliciano was going to be taken away, and he didn’t know if he could stand to watch that happen.

The dissociation worried Gilbert immensely, and the panic attack too for that matter. Neither Lovino nor Antonio seemed shocked when they learned he’d suffered both those afflictions on the same night.

I wonder how often he gets them.

He felt something akin to dread sit heavily in his stomach. Gilbert had seen his fair share of custody battles, and not all of them ended up in the child’s favor. The system had flaws, and it hurt and angered him greatly when an abusive or otherwise unfit parent was awarded custody despite the evidence against them. Feliciano clearly struggled with mental health,

and it was no surprise given his past. But Gilbert feared that his inability to manage his symptoms was going to reflect poorly on Lovino and his viability as a guardian.

There's Antonio, too. Gilbert thought as he made his way to the kitchen table. He pulled out some contact sheets he owned, dragging his laptop closer as he began researching.

Antonio may pose an issue in the case. Feliciano had mentioned that Antonio was Lovino's boyfriend. Now Gilbert personally didn't feel like it was an issue, but there were plenty of prejudiced people who may take issue with the fact that Lovino wasn't a *traditional* guardian.

"Fuck." Gilbert said softly to himself, feeling the odds stack more and more against them. Money was going to be an issue too, as he knew that there was no way they could afford a family attorney.

Unless…

Gilbert flipped through his contact sheets until he found who he was looking for. He already had this person in mind and nodded to himself, confident that this was indeed the right choice.

With a sigh, Gilbert started typing furiously on his laptop. He had a lot of research to do, and he knew that he was in for a long, sleepless night.

The curtains were thrown back, so nothing stood in the sun's way as it filled the entire room with its stifling light. Distant sounds of birds chirping marked the beginning of a new day, but Gilbert was anything but pleased. His face twitched when the sunlight hit his eyes, groaning in annoyance as he was roused firmly from a restless sleep.

Ugh, why the hell does my neck hurt so bad?

He sat up and stretched, noticing with mild surprise that he was still at the table. He looked around in a daze, rubbing at his eyes as the events of the night came crashing back.

"Shit." he mumbled, shooting up from his seat and towards the couch. With a sigh of relief, he found that Feliciano was still there, curled tightly in a ball. A glance at the clock told him that it was just past seven in the morning, which meant….

"Gil? You're not usually up until at least noon." Ludwig said in surprise as he emerged from the hallway.

Gilbert rubbed the back of his neck nervously, "Heh, about that-"

Shit, how am I going to explain this?

"Is that Feliciano?" he asked in alarm.

"*Shh,* don't wake him up!" Gilbert shushed loudly.

"You don't wake him up, *dummkopf.* Keep it down!"

Gilbert would usually snark back, but he was far too desperate not to wake Feliciano up. The teen was exhausted, and he would need the rest for the troubling days that were to follow.

“Whatever, just let him sleep.” Gilbert growled, turning sharply to walk into the kitchen.

Ludwig rushed forward to block his path, “Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

“No, I’m going to make coffee and drink it.” Gilbert shot back immediately, sidestepping his brother.

Ludwig remained undeterred, his voice uncompromising, “Tell me what’s happening.”

There was no way to get out of this conversation, so with a sigh Gilbert motioned to the hallway. His brother deserved the truth, or at least most of the truth. He didn’t want to wake Feliciano up, so it was best to put some distance between them and the living room.

Once they both stood at the back of the hallway, Gilbert began, “So, don’t freak out, but Feliciano maybe, probably ran away from home last night.”

Ludwig stared ahead blankly, like he was just told a particularly awful joke. When Gilbert didn’t laugh he responded, “He did *what?”*

“I said don’t freak out!” Gilbert whisper-yelled.

Ludwig brought his thumb and forefinger to pinch the bridge of his nose, “Explain.”

“I don’t know!” Gilbert threw his hands up. “I got a call from him late last night and he was in a really sketchy part of town, so I brought him here. I tried to take him home, but he refused, and here we are.” He left out the parts about the dissociation and panic attack, thinking that those private moments were better left to Feliciano to share.

Ludwig sighed, looking slowly up. His brow was furrowed in a mixture of confusion and worry, “So let me get this straight, he ran away from home but you don’t know why. His first instinct was to call *you* of all people, and now he’s asleep on our couch.”

“Uh-huh.” Gilbert nodded.

“Do you have any idea how ridiculous that is? Why would he run, and why did he call *you?*” Ludwig huffed.

“Hey!” Gilbert cried indignantly, displeased with the insinuation. “As crazy as it sounds, that’s what happened.

Ludwig sighed once more, rubbing at his temples. He leaned against the wall as he tried to make sense of what was happening, “I’m having a hard time believing that his brother would just let him go.”

Me too.

Lovino had sounded so desperate on the phone, and briefly Gilbert wondered if the two got into a fight.

“Whatever happened, he’s here now.” Gilbert crossed his arms, trying to word this next part carefully, “He… well, he wasn’t in the best shape when I found him.”

Ludwig’s eyes snapped up, “What? Is he alright?”

It looked like he was going to march right back out into the living room, but Gilbert put his hand up, “Woah! Yeah, he’ll be fine. Just, when he wakes up, please don’t treat him any differently if he seems… off.”

“Off?”

“Yeah.” Gilbert said thoughtfully. While he didn’t think that Feliciano would slip back into that dissociated state, he knew that it was a possibility.

Ludwig just peered at him with a questioning gaze, but didn’t verbalize any of the questions that he clearly had.

Gilbert shrugged dismissively, turning back down the hallway and into the living room. Once there, he noticed with some displeasure that Feliciano was beginning to stir.

Damn, wish he would’ve slept a little longer.

Gilbert shrugged off the slight disappointment as he sat on the edge of the couch, making sure not to actually touch Feliciano in any way. It took a few more minutes, but he finally opened his eyes and looked around.

“Good morning, sunshine!” Gilbert said brightly, even if his smile felt a little forced.

“Mornin’.” he mumbled, rubbing tiredly at his eyes. He looked around in confusion, eyes sparking in recognition when Ludwig walked carefully in. The blond greeted him with an awkward half-wave, and Feliciano returned it before he started to remember. The reaction wasn’t nearly as dramatic as it had been last night, but it did look like he might start crying at any given point.

“Hey, you’re alright. How are you feeling?” Gilbert asked softly.

Feliciano swiped at his eyes, sitting up fully with a half-hearted, “I’m okay.”

Gilbert nodded, “Good. Would you like anything to eat?”

Feliciano shook his head no. Across the room Ludwig sighed.

“Okay then. Well…” Gilbert wasn’t exactly sure how to tackle this next part, but he decided that his best course of action was to just say it, “I promised your brother that you’d call him first thing in the morning.”

Feliciano sucked in a breath, eyebrows shooting up in distress. He seemed terrified by the prospect of a simple phone call, hands fidgeting viciously in his lap.

Gilbert was afraid that he had just set off another anxiety attack when Ludwig swooped in. He all but shooed the albino away, taking his place closely next to Feliciano. He didn't say anything, but the silent support seemed to drain some of the tension from Feliciano's shoulders. He slumped over sideways, leaning his head against the blond's shoulder.

While the picture the two painted was cute, the situation was far too tense for Gilbert to properly tease his brother. Instead he silently handed Feliciano his phone. He took it with wide eyes, staring at it like it was a grenade about to explode.

"Would you like us to leave?" Gilbert asked softly.

Feliciano shook his head, "No, please stay."

Gilbert nodded, "Y'know, Lovino told me to tell you something last night."

Feliciano's head snapped up, the unvoiced question shown clearly in his eyes.

"He wanted me to tell you that he was sorry, and that he promised to tell you everything." Gilbert breathed with an encouraging smile.

He contemplated the words, eyes hardening ever so slightly in resolve. Feliciano took a deep breath as he wordlessly punched in a number, waiting nervously for an answer. He flinched, indicating that someone had picked up.

"Hi." Feliciano said meekly.

Gilbert had a pretty good idea what Lovino was saying because it wasn't long before Feliciano was responding, "It's okay… I'm fine… Yeah... Sorry…"

The conversation seemed fairly one-sided until Gilbert noticed how Feliciano grabbed Ludwig's hand for support. He drew in a deep breath before saying quietly, "Lovi, do you hate me?"

What?

Gilbert remembered how Lovino had talked about losing his brother, like it would absolutely kill him. There was no way that he hated Feliciano, and how he got that thought into his head was beyond him.

Whatever Lovino said in response caused Feliciano to start crying, "I'm sorry, sometimes I feel like I'm holding you back. Wouldn't you be happier if I just went away?"

All sorts of red flags were going off in Gilbert's head. Apparently it alarmed Ludwig as well, because his eyes blew open as he gripped Feliciano's hand tighter.

"I'm sorry!" Feliciano cried into the phone, "I don't mean to be so messed up!"

Every word seemed to drill a spike deeper into Gilbert's heart. It was true that he cared deeply about each of his kids in his line of work, and that he took things personally when a situation didn't go his way. But for some reason, it hurt particularly bad to find out that Feliciano felt this way about himself, and briefly he wondered when he had come to care so much about the little Italian.

"I'm sorry!" he cried one more time before holding the phone out for Gilbert to take. As soon as he handed the phone off, Feliciano buried his face in Ludwig's shoulder as he continued to cry.

Gilbert granted the two privacy, walking into the kitchen as he brought the device up to his ear.

"Feli? Dammit, I didn't mean it that way!" Lovino yelled into the phone.

"What happened?" Gilbert asked sharply.

Lovino groaned, "I don't know! I keep fucking everything up, *dammit!"*

"I'm sure it'll be fine." Gilbert placated.

"How would you know?!"

"I just do, okay? I did some research last night, and I think I found someone that can help." Gilbert tried to change the topic, hoping to defuse those dangerous emotions.

Lovino sighed loudly, clearly trying to calm himself down, "Great, now can I talk to my brother?"

Gilbert sighed as his attempt to distract Lovino obviously failed, "I don't know, he's pretty upset."

"That's why I want to talk to him, dipshit." was the scathing reply.

And that is precisely why you shouldn't talk to him.

"How about this, I'll give you my address so you can come and get him. But give him an hour to calm down." Gilbert bargained, sitting heavily down at the kitchen table.

"Ugh, I guess." Lovino huffed, clearly displeased but unable to do anything about it.

"Also," Gilbert chewed on his lip for a moment, "I want Antonio to be the one to pick him up."

Lovino choked on his own breath, gritting out a tense, *"What?"*

"You heard me. For whatever reason, Feli can't keep it together around you. I think it would be best if somebody else came and got him." Gilbert said firmly.

"I don't mind!" Antonio sang brightly.

Gilbert jumped, not realizing that Antonio had been there the entire time.

“Shut up, bastard!”

“But Lovi, I think he’s onto something.”

“I don’t give a shit, he can’t tell me what to do!”

“This isn’t about you, it’s about Feli.”

That gave Lovino pause. Gilbert listened in for the response, and was rewarded when he heard a long sigh, “Fucking whatever. Do what you want.”

The sound of footsteps echoed in the phone, “Lovi, come back!”

Gilbert cleared his throat, “Um, so should I just text you the address?”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ll be there in an hour.” Antonio said distractedly.

“Okay, see you then.” Gilbert said, hanging up when he didn’t receive a response.

Jesus, never a dull moment with him.

He quickly texted out his address before he made his way back into the living room. There Feliciano sat with his feet on the couch, leaning against Ludwig who had an arm wrapped around his shoulders. He sniffled every once in a while, but seemed much more in control of his emotions.

“Is Lovi coming to get me?” he asked nervously.

Gilbert shook his head, “Antonio will be here to get you in an hour.”

Feliciano breathed a sigh of relief, and Gilbert was relieved that he made the right decision. He turned to go into the kitchen, letting Ludwig take the lead in keeping Feliciano calm. Once in the kitchen, he flopped down in his seat and rubbed at his eyes. He was tired, but he didn’t regret staying up all night to do some research. They were still at a disadvantage, and Gilbert couldn’t say he was necessarily confident, but he knew they had a fighting chance.

The hour came and went quickly, and it wasn’t long before a sharp knock sounded off at the door. Feliciano squeaked in surprise, or maybe apprehension, as Gilbert opened the door.

He was met by an exhausted Spaniard, who tried to push on a smile before saying, “Good morning, I’m Antonio.”

“Gilbert.”

They shook hands, and Gilbert wordless led Antonio inside.

Feliciano stood, adamantly refusing eye contact as he mumbled, “Hi Toni.”

Antonio sighed in relief, walking right up to Feliciano to wrap him in a tight hug, "*Oh gracias a Dios,* we were so worried!"

"I'm sorry." Feliciano hugged back, looking guilty as they pulled away.

Antonio shook his head, "Don't worry about it, let's just go home."

Feliciano audibly gulped, "Yeah."

With a much more genuine smile, Antonio turned to Gilbert, "Thank you so much for keeping him safe."

Gilbert shrugged, "Hey, it's what I'm here for."

Ludwig snorted, but didn't comment. Instead he walked up to Feliciano and gave him a short hug. He quickly whispered something, receiving a gentle nod in response.

Feliciano thanked Gilbert before he was led out of the apartment. After a few more goodbyes, the two disappeared down the hallway and down the elevator.

With a heavy sigh, Gilbert trudged tiredly to his laptop to stare at it once more.

"You've been working a lot lately." Ludwig mumbled suspiciously, eyeing the contact sheets on the table.

"There's always work to be done." Gilbert replied shortly, not even sparing a glance up at his brother.

Ludwig sat across from Gilbert at the table, "So are you going to tell me what really happened?"

"I don't think it's really my place to tell." Gilbert sighed.

Ludwig crossed his arms in annoyance, "I thought you would say that."

Gilbert laughed softly. While he wanted to tell Ludwig what was happening, it really wasn't his place to say anything. Ludwig had always been nosey, and he had no doubt that he would weasel the truth out of somebody eventually. But Gilbert was a master at shrugging his brother off, and the fastest way to do that was to embarrass him.

"And just what were you whispering into Feli's ear earlier?" he asked with a wicked smile.

Ludwig shifted uncomfortably in his seat, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Mm-hm, sure you don't."

"It wasn't anything, stop looking at me like that!" Ludwig yelled, face quickly going red.

"Like what?" Gilbert asked as his smirk only grew.

"Like you know something I don't." Ludwig stood up.

Gilbert laughed, “You can’t get anything past me, *bruder.”*

Ludwig scoffed, storming away towards his bedroom. Gilbert knew his brother well, and all it took was a few suggestive eyebrow waggles and some smirking to send him scurrying to his room.

Too easy.

Now with some time to think alone, Gilbert got back to work. He needed to get into contact with a close friend of his. It was a gamble, but he didn’t have anything else at the moment. He sighed as he shot a quick text to a certain someone, hoping against hope that this was the right thing to do.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so tired I don't even know what to put in this author's note lol.

Thanks so much for reading, y'all are amazing. Also, how in the hell did this get over 100 kudos? Like y'all that is so amazing I can't. Bless up, for real I appreciate it so so much.

Gracias a dios: thank god

Hope you enjoyed the chapter, shit is pretty much hitting the fan here lol.

Love y'all much.

'Till next time.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

> Hey y'all, so there is a brief mention of suicide ideation. It's in the middle, and it's really just implied. I have more info at the bottom, but if this isn't a subject that you can handle, then please tread lightly.
>
> <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano walked with his eyes fixed on the ground. He counted the seconds, knowing that before long he was going to have to confront his brother. He didn't look forward to it, fearing that he would find only resentment and scorn in Lovino's sharp eyes. Any attempt Antonio made to coax a conversation out of him was promptly ignored, and Feliciano pretended not to feel the questioning gaze directed at him.

He'd had more time to think about what Cristiano had said, arriving at conclusions he wished he could have remained ignorant to. The first conclusion was that he was, as he had always feared, a burden to both Lovino and Antonio. It wasn't surprising. Not really.

I mean, Lovi said it himself.

Feliciano swiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. He refused to cry anymore, it made him feel pathetic. Or at least more pathetic than he already was. There was a cool breeze that sliced through his body, shooting cold daggers through his veins. Feliciano crossed his arms tightly across his chest as he tried to ignore it.

I can't trust Lovi anymore.

That was the second conclusion. His brother had been sneaking around and hiding things from him. The most obvious example of this was Cristiano himself. He trusted Cristiano about as far as he could throw him (that is to say, *not at all)*, but just like Feliciano had inherited his eyes from his father, Lovino had apparently taken after his deceitful nature. While it pained Feliciano to draw comparisons between the two, he was still awfully confused and hurt. The trustworthiness of Antonio had yet to be seen, but Feliciano prayed that the deception started and ended with his brother.

Conclusion number three was that he was to blame for all the drama surrounding them. He was at the center of things, and Feliciano was quickly coming to the end of his rope as the guilt threatened to swallow him whole. His exchange with Cristiano had shaken him to the very core, but he was grateful for the interaction. Truths had been revealed to him that Lovino refused to share, and for that he thanked his father.

Feliciano sighed heavily, never thinking there would come a day where he felt grateful to his father and distrustful of his brother. At the sigh, Antonio looked at him eagerly, like maybe he was about to break his uncharacteristic silence. But once again, Feliciano had to disappoint him. Antonio looked down at the ground, a conflicted expression overtaking his features.

There I go again, making everything worse.

He scowled to himself.

The offer to return to Italy sat heavily in his mind, festering until it infected his entire brain. Roma had been a successful businessman who had owned a massive vineyard that seemingly sprawled for miles. As children, he and Lovino would go visit and sometimes stay for days at a time. Not only was it an escape from their nightmarish lives, but it had been the only place he truly felt happy. He had a mixed perception of his home, but if he could one day return to that vineyard and be allowed to just sit under the open sky, Feliciano thought he could finally find peace.

But the offer wasn't to return to the vineyard.

It was to go home.

With *him.*

Grandpa Roma is dead, I'll never get to see his farm again.

True as that might be, Cristiano had brought up some convincing arguments. Feliciano did miss his home, and he knew that he was messed up and in the way and not worth anybody's time. But Cristiano was also a horrible, abusive man. Was Feliciano really willing to risk that abuse once more just to free Lovino and Antonio?

I don't know.

Feliciano shivered as he rubbed the back of his arms. Cristiano had held him in a fierce grip, and he could feel the bruise that sat atop his scars. There were perhaps a dozen, and maybe more, of those circular spots that branded his skin. He hardly remembered how he got most of them, the pain had meshed together until it felt like one long, neverending experience. He remembered how used he felt back then, like his only purpose was as an outlet for Cristiano's rage and cruelty. The scars made Feliciano a victim without his consent, and he would never, *never* forgive his father for that.

Lovi has scars too.

With a small gasp Feliciano looked up.

How could he forget? Lovino had endured the same, and sometimes even worse, abuse. Cristiano had said that Lovino was too prideful to let Feliciano go willingly, but that wasn't true at all. Lovino, while prideful, wasn't cruel. He wouldn't allow Feliciano to walk back into the lion's den alone, not when he himself knew firsthand the agony of being trapped with a monster.

Right?

Feliciano needed reassurance, “Hey Toni?”

Antonio whipped his head up, “Yeah? What is it?”

“Um… you guys don’t like, want me gone. Do you?”

“What?” Antonio asked in shock as he furrowed his eyebrows.

“I don’t know, like maybe if I wasn’t here then you and Lovi could get on with your lives.”

“I don’t understand, where is this coming from?” Antonio asked, baffled.

Feliciano gave a half-hearted shrug.

Antonio watched him carefully as they continued to walk. The sky was overcast, subduing the vibrant autumn colors. Dull would have been an apt description, but to Feliciano it was more severe. The world had stopped spinning altogether, the lively hum of activity that characterised the city had been washed away. Now it seemed motionless. Dead.

“I’m just in the way.” Feliciano said quietly.

Antonio’s gait stuttered. “What are you talking about?” he exclaimed incredulously

“I mean,” Feliciano cleared his throat as he broke eye contact, “I was just thinking that maybe everyone would be better off without me.”

Antonio stopped walking entirely. Feliciano was forced to come to a halt as well as he turned to stare curiously. Antonio hardly even breathed as his face moved from confusion to disbelief until it finally landed on horror. Suddenly, two hands gripped Feliciano’s shoulders and he did his best not to flinch as Antonio dragged him close with searching eyes.

“Feli, I need you to tell me the truth, okay?”

Feliciano gulped, nodding as he wondered what he had said wrong.

Antonio struggled to get his voice to work, fumbling with his words, “You don’t… I mean you wouldn’t…” He groaned in frustration, unconsciously digging his fingers into Feliciano’s shoulders as he finally forced out, “You know Lovi and I care about you a lot, right?”

“It must feel pretty bad realizing that they never cared about you at all.”

Cristiano’s words poisoned Feliciano’s mind, but he nodded back anyway.

“And you know you can talk to us about anything?”

Once again, Feliciano nodded.

Antonio drew in a shaky breath as Feliciano looked on in confusion. He hadn’t thought his question would earn him such an intense response. Antonio shook his head to himself before

asking, “How often do you think things like that?”

Feliciano pondered the question. It wasn’t like he actively thought on such dark things, but it always sat untouched at the back of his mind. It wasn’t so much a voice that whispered negative things to him as it was an implicit truth he believed about himself. He used to be able to ignore it, too busy focusing on the present just like Roma had taught him.

But then he died, destroying most of Feliciano’s forward progress. Yet Lovino and Antonio were always there, guiding him through the grief and uncertainty.

But then Cristiano had revealed his innermost thoughts, stripping away the layers of willful ignorance to lay bare his insecurities to his own consciousness. He hadn’t been getting better at all. Just as Cristiano had said, he had been living in denial.

I’m too messed up, they can’t help me.

Feliciano’s chest hurt as he was forced to grapple with that fact. Antonio still stood there expectantly, worry painting his features as he awaited a response. With a pang, Feliciano realized he knew the answer.

How often did he think everyone would be better off without him?

Easy.

“Every day.”

Antonio sucked in a breath, hands momentarily tightening on his shoulders. This time Feliciano did flinch at the pain as he looked down in shame. Antonio quickly loosened his grip as he tried to think of something to say. Feliciano decided to save him the trouble by twisting out of his grasp.

“Sorry, let’s just go.” he said quickly, trying to avoid the inevitable game of twenty questions that seemed to happen every time his poor mental health made itself known.

Feliciano put his head down and started walking, but was halted when his upper arm was captured in a tight hold. He jerked around, that cornered feeling from the previous night returning as the hold aggravated the bruise that Cristiano had left.

“Feli, wait-”

“Let me go!” Feliciano yelled desperately as he ripped his arm from Antonio’s grip.

Antonio backed off, shocked at the reaction. Feliciano stood, chest heaving as he willed himself not to descend into a panic attack. It took a few more minutes of deep breathing, but Feliciano felt his nerves calm down as he rubbed the spot where Antonio had grabbed him.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have grabbed you. Are you okay?” Antonio asked with guilty eyes.

Feliciano continued to rub at his arm. While the bruise was no longer painful, he felt as if his skin was on fire. It was overwhelming, so he decided not to say anything and simply shrug in

response.

Apparently, the shrug was not a sufficient answer, “Is there something wrong with your arm?”

Feliciano lowered his hand as he shook his head, “No, I’m fine. Let’s just go.”

Antonio nodded slowly, obviously not believing him. They started walking once more. The air around them felt viscous, fraught with unresolved tension and too many unsaid words.

They were drawing near to their apartment building. Feliciano’s shoulders began creeping up to his ears as he imagined the reaction he was going to receive from his brother. Not only did Lovino probably resent him for holding him back, but he was probably furious that Feliciano had run away. He had acted childish, and now he was going to have to reap the consequences.

“Feli, breathe.” Antonio reminded.

Feliciano exhaled loudly, not realizing that he had been holding his breath. He peered up at Antonio and was shocked to see tears welling up in his eyes, “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Antonio said, fighting to hold it together.

“Wha-”

“I just-” Antonio sucked in a breath, “I just realized that I never answered your question.”

Question?

Antonio must have seen the lack of comprehension, “You asked me if we wanted you gone.”

Oh. That question.

Feliciano dreaded the response, even though he knew, *he knew* that Antonio would never wish him away. Now if only he could convince his anxiety that.

“You don’t have to answer, it was stupid.” Feliciano looked down at the sidewalk as they stopped in front of the front doors of their building.

Antonio laid a hand on Feliciano’s shoulder gently, taking care not to apply any pressure, “We would never want you to leave us. You’re just as much my brother as Lovi’s, and I’m sorry that I never told you that.

Feliciano felt a lump begin to form in his throat, unable to respond to such a bold statement.

“I know you’re confused, and it wasn’t fair to keep secrets from you, but everything we did was to protect you.”

“Why would yo-”

Antonio cut him off, “I’m so, *so* sorry. About everything. We wouldn’t be better off without you, and if you ever get those thoughts, please talk to us. It would kill us, *kill me,* if you were gone.” Those tears in Antonio’s eyes were beginning to fall, and Feliciano got the feeling that their definitions of what it meant to be *gone* were different.

“How can I believe you?” Feliciano implored, voice cracking.

“You just have to trust me, please.”

Feliciano stared blankly, feeling how Antonio’s hand shook on his shoulder. His eyes pleaded desperately to be believed, and Feliciano was having a hard time coming up with reasons why he would be lying. Suddenly Feliciano felt guilty that he had ever doubted Antonio’s sincerity, like the Spaniard had a deceitful bone in his body. He wanted with all his heart to trust Antonio.

So he did.

Feliciano dove forward. Antonio let out a quiet *oof* as he had to catch him in his arms.

“I do trust you, Toni. I’m sorry, it’s just too much right now.” Feliciano confided, burying his face in Antonio’s chest. No tears fell, but he felt like he could cry at the realization that he wasn’t alone in this.

Antonio gripped him back tightly, “I know, we’re all under a lot of pressure right now. But that’s alright, we’ll make it through it. I promise.”

Feliciano nodded, slowly overcoming his dour mood. At his core Feliciano was a hopeless optimist, even if he forgot it sometimes. Lovino loved him, and had proven that time and time again. They suffered together, recovered together, and Feliciano couldn’t believe that he ever doubted him.

Lovino may have been keeping secrets, but Feliciano at least owed it to him to hear out the reasons why. Lovino wouldn’t give Feliciano up that easily, it wasn’t in his nature. He was strong-willed and wouldn’t do anything he didn’t want to. That is, unless he was being forced.

Forced.

With a gasp, Feliciano’s head whipped up.

Antonio let him go, “Sorry, I can sto-”

“I need to talk to Lovi.” Feliciano said, slowly working himself into a frenzy.

Antonio cocked his head to the side, “Uh, yeah that’s what we’re doin-”

“No, I have to talk to him *right now.”* Feliciano said urgently, turning to enter the apartment building.

“Hey, wait!”

Feliciano ignored him, rushing through the lobby and into the stairwell.

I have to know.

He took the stairs two at a time as he scrambled ever upwards.

I have to know.

Finally he burst onto the right floor, tearing down the hallway as he reached the correct door and placed his hand on the doorknob.

Feliciano paused.

I have to know.

He pushed the door open.

Chapter End Notes

Yo, it's been a while lol. Sorry, I got a new job that I absolutely love, and I'm just trying to figure out my schedule and all that jazz.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! So this chapter was actually double this length, but I didn't like how the second half was turning out. Therefore, I'm rewriting this (so this chapter is effectively a 'part 1'). Sorry for the cliffhanger, but the next part should be up very soon.

So I wanted to address something: Feli kind of expresses a passive suicide wish. It's a real thing, and although he may not be consciously aware of it, it's a dangerous thing that needs to be treated seriously. The way Antonio addresses it is honestly not the best approach - it's best to approach the situation directly and not dance around it like he did. You should also never say stuff like: "You wouldn't do anything stupid"... or "You're not thinking about..." Antonio cut himself off before he said those things, but it is kind of a natural (if incorrect) way to phrase the question when you're uncomfortable.

Okay, long author's note but wanted to make things clear.

Love you all so much, stay safe my lovelies.

'Till next time.

Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano pushed the door wide open before stumbling in with his hands on his knees. He had flown up the stairs, and the activity was catching up with his aching lungs.

Lovino's head shot up from where he had been cradling it in his hands as he sat impatiently at the kitchen table, "Feli, what are yo-"

"What did... he say... to you?" Feliciano wheezed as he tried to catch his breath

"Huh?" Lovino asked dumbly, eyebrows furrowed in confusion.

"Our father," Feliciano finally got out, breathing returning to normal, "what did you say to you?"

Lovino's eyes went wide, standing up when Antonio burst through the door next, *"Dios mío*… sorry you're too… fast." he heaved comically, sounding just like Feliciano had mere moments before.

Lovino cleared his throat, reclaiming the attention in the room, "How do you know about that?"

"It doesn't matter, what did he say to you?" Feliciano asked, desperate for answers.

"Like hell it matters!" Lovino shot an accusing look at Antonio.

"Don't look at me like that, I didn't do anything!" Antonio said defensively.

"Lovi, please. I have to know." Feliciano pushed.

Please, I need to know you wouldn't give up on me.

Lovino was tense, clearly conflicted. With a sigh, he gave in to the plea and motioned for Feliciano to take a seat at the table.

All three of them sat down, Lovino exchanging subtle glances with Antonio. Feliciano honestly wasn't shocked that Antonio was in on Lovino's deception. The two confided in each other exclusively, almost to a fault. Feliciano didn't hold it against him, he was far too focused on learning the truth.

Feliciano leaned forward in his seat as Lovino drew in a breath, "I don't know how you found out about *that bastard,* and I expect an explanation. But, I guess I owe you one first."

Feliciano nodded his head eagerly.

Lovino sighed, “Remember all those phone calls? Yeah, well guess who the hell was on the other line…”

Lovino explained everything, starting at the very beginning. It was tough to listen to the relentless harassment his brother had been subjected to, including being chased by car through the city. It explained why he had been so edgy lately, as well as the constant exhaustion. He learned that Cristiano hadn’t had a *“nice talk,”* with Lovino as he had put it. No, he had all but threatened him, going so far as slamming him against a wall in order to intimidate him.

Sounds like something he would do. Feliciano thought bitterly.

“So basically, he wants to take you away from me.” Lovino ended, sounding close to tears.

“Why?” Feliciano asked.

Lovino threw his hands up, “I don’t know! None of this makes sense.” He huffed loudly, annoyance overshadowing his sadness. Suddenly, Lovino seemed to remember something, “Feli, what I’m going to say next is… well, it fucking sucks.”

Feliciano cocked his head to the side, “What is it?”

“Well,” Lovino started, fidgeting nervously with his hands, “Roma didn’t… he never - Fuck!” He stood up and began pacing, clearly unhappy about something. Antonio simply watched, completely resigned

“Lovi, what’s wrong?”

Lovino groaned loudly, stopping as he turned, “Roma, *the fucking traitor,* never had custody of us.”

Feliciano was going to tell Lovino off for referring to their grandfather so callously when the words registered.

He never… had…

“What?” Feliciano asked hollowly.

“You heard me! I don’t know what happened, or why. But *that asshole* has legal guardianship over you.” Lovino stomped around in the kitchen, causing some of the dishes to rattle as his pacing continued.

“Oh.”

Feliciano didn’t know how to react to the new information. He currently had two thoughts running simultaneously through his brain:

So Lovi doesn’t want to get rid of me.

and,

He's going to take me away.

The latter of those thoughts made his heart skip a beat, before it began to gallop madly in his chest. He started picking at his nails in a furious attempt to distract himself. He didn't realize that he was picking so hard that he nicked the skin, causing blood to run delicately down his hand.

Antonio reached over and covered Feliciano's hands with his own, putting an end to the fidgeting, "We're not going to let him take you away."

Feliciano stopped moving, looking up to find fire in Antonio's eyes. He had to turn away from the intensity, instead fixing his gaze on the table.

Lovino plopped back in his chair, angrily muttering to himself. Feliciano stared at him for a moment, not able to fully vindicate his brother in his mind. No, that sense of betrayal still lingered. He had one more question that needed answering before he could forgive Lovino:

"When were you going to tell me this?"

Feliciano didn't mean to sound as accusatory as he probably did, but now the question was out in the open and he expected a valid reason.

"I was going to tell you." Lovino huffed, crossing his arms across his chest defensively.

Feliciano sighed, "But *when,* Lovi?"

"Eventually." he said nervously.

Feliciano scoffed, irritated that his brother was being so stubborn, "Really? Why can't you just give me a straight answer?"

"I am, I told you I would have told you eventually!" Lovino's voice was growing in volume.

"And when would that have been, before or after I was dragged back to Italy?" Feliciano said lowly.

Lovino glared, "You're not being dragged back anywhere, not if I have a say in it."

Feliciano huffed, but let the issue rest for the time being. It was clear to him now that Lovino wouldn't give him up so easily - a fact that soothed his earlier state of mental distress. He was content with that for now, even if his insecurities still haunted him.

He wouldn't tell me because I would have just gotten in the way somehow.

"Now it's your turn. Explain." Lovino said, not needing to clarify what he meant.

Feliciano looked down, "Um, I guess I owe both of you an apology first."

"For what?" Antonio asked lightly.

“For running away. I heard you guys yelling and I kind of, maybe eavesdropped a little.” Feliciano rushed out guiltily.

Lovino sucked in a breath, but didn’t say anything as he let Feliciano continue, “Nobody would tell me what was going on, so I decided to find out. But then you guys kept shouting about me, and then Lovi said…”

“Shit.” Lovino looked physically ill as he dragged a hand down his face, “Look, Feli, I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry, I was just upset.”

Feliciano nodded in acknowledgement, not really ready to forgive him just yet.

“Anyway, I got lost. There was a bar, and some guy yelled at me and it just had to be *him,* and I really didn’t want to, but he forced me to walk with him and-”

“Woah!” Lovino put a hand up, “Slow down a bit, who forced you to walk with them?”

Feliciano laughed dryly, “Who do you think?”

“Motherfucker.” Lovino slumped back in his chair in disbelief, “What are the fucking odds?”

“That’s the same thing he said.”

That was definitely not something that Lovino wanted to hear at the moment. He rubbed at his eyes, obviously trying to stay calm, “Okay, what the hell did he want?”

Feliciano breathed in deeply, “He said that he just wanted to talk.”

“He *just* wanted to talk?” Lovino growled.

“Yeah, but-”

“But what? He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Lovino made a move to stand up, an odd mix of worry and rage alight in his eyes. The worry there was comforting, convincing Feliciano that his father’s deceitful tongue told nothing but lies about his brother.

Dio, how could I think he hated me?

“It’s fine, he just kind of grabbed me is all.” Feliciano said, gesturing placatingly.

Antonio gasped, “He grabbed your arm, didn’t he?”

Feliciano looked down and nodded, feeling the guilty look Antonio shot him.

“Let me see.” Lovino’s voice had no room for compromise, already marching over.

“I’m okay, seriously. It doesn’t really even hurt.” Feliciano said softly, resigned to the fact that nothing would stop his brother when he was worried about something.

“Bullshit, lift up your sleeve.” Lovino stood with his arms crossed next to him.

With a sigh, Feliciano hiked up his sleeve. Underneath revealed a dark bruise in the vague shape of a hand. It really didn't hurt all that bad, but Antonio had unwittingly aggravated it earlier.

Antonio groaned in distress, "I'm sorry, I didn't know."

"I know you didn't, it's okay." Feliciano reassured.

Lovino simply stood in muted horror. Feliciano wished he knew what was going on in his head. He snapped back to reality, starting to pace again, "He's dead. I swear to *fuck,* he's dead!"

"Lovi, please calm down." Feliciano pleaded.

"How can I?" Lovino turned, a desperate look overtaking his features. "It's just like when we were kids, it's like we can't just get away!"

Feliciano rubbed at his eyes. What Lovino said rang true, it really did feel like they were kids again. It seemed like life just had it out for them, and Feliciano wondered if they would ever be allowed to just rest.

"But none of us are kids anymore, we can fight back now." Antonio said hopefully.

"You really think that? Because so far I've been threatened and slammed into a wall, Feli already has bruises again, and there wasn't a damn thing we could do about it!" Lovino ranted in frustration.

"We can fight back, and we're going to." Antonio said with resolve.

Lovino snorted disbelievingly, but sat back down in his chair. He glared intently down at the table, "What did he say to you?"

Feliciano started fidgeting again, not sure where to start, "Um, he just asked how we were doing and stuff."

"Really? Is that all the asshole said?" Lovino asked, one eyebrow quirked upwards.

Feliciano nodded as he looked at his hands. He didn't know how to bring up the other things his father had said, like how Lovino hated him or how he was holding them back.

"Bullshit, what did he really want?" Lovino growled.

Feliciano sighed, not surprised that he was called out on his bluff, "He asked a lot about you, actually."

"What?" Lovino asked incredulously.

"Yeah, he wanted to know how you were doing. And then he went on about some other stuff…" Feliciano trailed off.

“What other stuff?” Lovino pushed.

“Um, just stuff about… uh, about how much I hold you guys back and that if I went back to Italy with him then he’ll leave you alone?” Feliciano ended the phrase like a question, rushing the words out before he lost his nerve.

The room went silent.

“He said *what?”* Lovino growled lowly as he leaned forward in his seat.

“I’m sorry!” Feliciano said with a panicked edge to his voice, “He was just saying that I was in your way, and that you hated me. Then some other stuff like how if I left with him then he would forgive me for being messed up, and-”

“What?!” Lovino screamed. The chair scraped shrilly against the floor as he jumped up.

Feliciano flinched at the grating sound, “I’m sorry! I-I didn’t mean to-” his breathing was picking up again, panic beginning to take him hostage.

Lovino simply raged where he stood, hurling threats and profanities. He didn’t seem to know how to vent his anger, starting to pace in the kitchen with no particular rhythm. He simply stomped in one direction before jerking to another one aggressively.

Antonio stood up and drowned out Lovino’s angry cursing with a stern voice, “You need to calm down, *now.”*

Lovino’s eyes snapped to his, not ceasing in his one-sided rant, “That manipulative *bastard!* How fucking dare he say those things? I swear to God almighty he’s fucking dead!”

Feliciano knew that the anger wasn’t directed at him, but raised voices always set him off. He already had one panic attack the night before, and had come close to another one earlier that morning. He was unable to control it, it was his unfortunate reaction to stressful events. He cursed himself silently, sick and tired of the dysfunctional response as he sat at the table hyperventilating.

“You’re freaking him out, you need to calm down.” Antonio crossed his arms as he stared his angry boyfriend down.

Lovino ignored him, too lost in his own rage.

“Lovino!”

Antonio had yelled it, and Lovino instantly came to a halt with wide eyes. Feliciano was shocked too, trying to think of a time when Antonio had actually used Lovino’s full name.

Now that he finally had his attention, Antonio brought his voice down, “Sit down. Now.”

Lovino acquiesced silently, scowling at the ceiling as he crossed his arms.

Seemingly satisfied that he had diffused the situation, Antonio turned his attention to where Feliciano was still attempting to get control of himself, “Are you okay?”

Feliciano nodded, not able to talk at the current moment. He practiced his breathing exercises and was relieved to find that they were working, slowly but surely.

“What else did he say?” Lovino growled, eyes never leaving the ceiling.

“Lovi, not right no-”

“I-It’s okay.” Feliciano gasped, forcing his panic into submission. “He basically just went on about how I hold you guys back and that you never cared about me.”

Antonio gasped, and Lovino’s glare intensified.

“He apologized for letting me live with you guys for so long, and that he would forgive me for being so messed up as long as I went back to Italy with him, and-”

“Stop that.” Lovino said sternly.

Feliciano looked at him curiously, “Stop what?”

“Stop saying that you’re messed up.” Lovino’s eyes met Feliciano’s, pinning him to the spot with their quiet intensity.

“I mean it’s true though, isn’t it?”

“No, why would yo-”

“You said it yourself, I’m emotionally unstable and just get in the way.” Feliciano was resigned as he paraphrased his brother’s words.

Lovino closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, staying silent.

The lack of response disheartened Feliciano, “I’m sorry, I’ll try to-”

“Shut up.”

“What?”

“I said, *shut up.”* Lovino opened his eyes. They positively swam in regret, “You’re not messed up, and you’re not in the way.”

“But you said-”

“I know what I said, alright?” Lovino scrubbed at his eyes. “Look, if anyone’s messed up here it’s me.”

“That’s not true, you-”

“Let me finish, dammit!” Lovino said. When Feliciano remained quiet, he continued, “I lost my cool last night. I know that’s not an excuse for what I said, but the pressure finally got to me. I snapped.” He laughed humorlessly, “Pretty immature of me, right?”

Feliciano took the words in, remembering with a pang that Lovino was only a mere three years older than him. They were both highly volatile teenagers, even if Lovino’s jaded eyes felt so much older.

“I’m the only one in the way of anything. I thought that I could protect you by not telling you what was happening, and you see how well that worked out.” Lovino suddenly looked exhausted at the words, guilt clouding his gaze as he expressed himself in a rare show of self-awareness.

“It’s my fault too.” Antonio jumped in.

“No, you had nothing to do with my shitty decision.” Lovino objected.

Antonio shook his head, “But I went along with it. Don’t blame yourself completely, I’m equally guilty.”

“I don’t blame either of you.” Even though his heart still felt heavy with betrayal, Feliciano knew that he would be able to move on. Besides, there was still a large part of himself that thought that he was the guilty party here.

“Feli, you have every right to be angry at us. We hid things from you, and it got you hurt in the end.” Antonio said sadly.

But I’m the one who ran. I’m the one who can’t control their anxiety. I’m the one who’s too much of a coward to leave so you can move on…

“Nope, cut that out right now.” Lovino reprimanded.

“What?” Feliciano asked in confusion.

“I know that look, you’re blaming yourself, aren’t you?”

Feliciano looked down, not sure how to respond to being called out.

“Look, I’m sorry. I never should have said those things, and I can’t imagine how much that hurt you.” Lovino brought in a shaky breath, “I… I don’t know what I’m doing, and I’m scared.”

Feliciano’s eyes widened at the admission.

“I’m scared of trying to live on our own, I’m scared of myself because I know that I just keeping fucking up, and I’m scared that I’ll lose you.”

“Lovi, I-”

“It hurts, okay?” Lovino had never looked so vulnerable before, but now that the words had started, it was hard to get them to stop. “I know I’ve failed as your brother. I couldn’t keep you safe as a kid, and now I’m about to fail as a guardian too.”

Feliciano shook his head vehemently, “Stop it, you’re not a failure.”

Lovino snorted, “Yeah and the sky isn’t blue.”

“I’m serious.” Feliciano crossed his arms across his chest.

“I am too. Look, we can throw this pity party all day long, but I need you to understand that you were being manipulated last night. Everything that asshole said to you, especially the parts about you being messed up, were garbage. Got it?” The fire was back in Lovino’s eyes.

Feliciano still wasn’t fully convinced, “But-”

“No ‘buts.’ What he said to you was a load of bullshit. You’re not a burden to us, we don’t want you gone, and you are *not* messed up, okay?”

“...Okay.” he said in a small voice.

“Good.” Lovino said with a nod. He leaned back in his chair, most likely worn out from the emotional confessions.

“Maybe we should all take a break, we can talk about things more after a *siesta.”* Antonio said.

Feliciano nodded, thinking that he needed some alone time to stew on everything that he was told. He felt more secure in his relationship with Antonio and Lovino after their little heart to heart. It seemed that there had simply been a severe lack in communication and Feliciano interpreted things in the most negative way possible. It hadn’t helped that Cristiano had been able to capitalize on his brief moment of doubt, but Feliciao didn’t plan on giving his father another chance to manipulate him.

He’s the enemy, not my family.

Lovino sighed as he stood, turning without another word. Antonio started to follow him, but Feliciano felt compelled to tell him something first:

“Lovi?”

He turned, “Hmm?”

Feliciano began fidgeting, “I, uh, I forgive you, and…” he took in a deep breath, “and I trust you.”

Lovino’s face crumpled slightly as he reached a hand up to grab his shirt right over where his heart was, “You don’t have to forgive me.”

“No, but I want to. Just please don’t hide things from me anymore.” Feliciano implored.

Lovino shook his head, “Never again.”

Feliciano stepped forward and held his arms open. Lovino’s eyes screwed shut as he accepted the hug, “I’m sorry, I’ll try to be better.”

“I know. *Ti voglio bene, Lovi.”*

Lovino didn’t respond verbally, but he did tighten his grip at the words. It had been an emotional couple of hours, but Feliciano thought he understood his brother at least a little better.

Antonio watched with a small smile as the tension that had permeated the apartment for far too long started to disappear. While Feliciano said he trusted both Lovino and Antonio, he knew that it would take a while for him to fully believe it himself. He still had negative thoughts about himself and his role in their family, and he knew that Antonio definitely planned on having a word with him about it. But for now the air had been cleared, and they could finally move on the way they had promised from day one:

Together.

Chapter End Notes

Alrighty, here's the unofficial part 2! I just fixed up some dialogue and stuff, but I'm glad I was finally able to get it out. I hope you enjoyed it!

Thank you so much for reading, I appreciate y'all for taking the time to read this far.

Remember kids: communication is key. Our boys aren't very good at it, but this was a start lol.

Translation:
Ti voglio bene fratello - basically, a familial way to say 'I love you'

Let me know if you're still enjoying this, or if it's getting boring or something. I live to please, so if the story is starting to drag or something, let me know!

Thanks again for reading, you guys are the best.

'Til next time!

Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio shifted uncomfortably in his bed, finding it impossible to sleep. He flopped an arm over to the other side of the bed only to groan in frustration when he was met with cold sheets. Lovino was still at work, and wasn't due back for hours. Despite having known that, Antonio couldn't help but feel just a little disappointed.

With a sigh he shifted to check the time, noting that it was just after one in the morning. Antonio laid back down and rubbed at his eyes. Time was ticking particularly slow ever since the dramatic turn of events over the weekend. It was now Monday night — well, technically it was Tuesday morning — and things were getting back to normal.

Well, relatively.

Feliciano was still obviously edgy around them, and Antonio really couldn't blame him. They'd been hiding things from him, treating him like the kid that he no longer was. Not to mention Cristiano just so happened to find Feliciano on the streets and exploit his emotionally compromised state.

Seriously, what are the odds?

Antonio still couldn't believe the terrible hand fate had dealt them. Lately he'd been feeling like this life wasn't his own, like they were just some characters being twisted around in some terrible fantasy. If he was still religious, he would have gone to church and prayed for relief, but now all he felt like doing was cursing God for all their suffering.

Sick of the pointless musing, Antonio sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. At this rate he wasn't going to get any sleep, so what was the point in moping in bed? Besides, something Feliciano said was eating at him, replaying in his mind on loop.

He stood up, silently padding across his room as he pushed the door open. Antonio crept his way down the hall and to where he knew Feliciano was peacefully sleeping. He cracked open the teen's door and poked his head inside.

The room was dark, and Antonio was relieved to see the soft rise and fall of Feliciano's chest as he slept. He had the blanket pulled tightly around his shoulders and didn't so much as flinch as Antonio creaked the door closed. While it may have been ridiculous for him to feel so paranoid, he couldn't help but feel that one day he would peer into that bedroom and would be met with nothing but emptiness.

"I was just thinking that maybe everyone would be better off without me."

Antonio clenched his fists as he recalled those words. They had stolen the breath from his lungs the moment Feliciano had uttered them, taking him back to a time not so far gone when

he had similar thoughts of his own.

Unable to expel the negativity that coursed through his system, Antonio walked out to the kitchen. Once there he sat heavily on one of the chairs and buried his face into his hands. It was getting to be too much. Every step they took only steered them down a darker path to which there was no end in sight.

"Dios, what do we do?" Antonio called softly in the empty kitchen. He realized how futile it was to call to God — he wouldn't listen to someone like him.

With a harsh shake of the head, Antonio tried to ignore those thoughts and instead think about what he should do next.

He needed to address Feliciano's alarmingly poor mental health. The anxiety, panic attacks, dissociation, and now suicide ideation were all things that they needed to do something about. Antonio knew from experience that ignoring mental health only leads to a whole litany of other problems, and he was ashamed to say that they hadn't really put the effort in to confront the underlying problems that sat at the core of Feliciano's worsening mental state.

In all honesty, Antonio wanted to seek professional help for him. It felt like anything could set off one of his panic attacks or dissociation spells, and both he and Lovino were laughably ill-equipped to deal with them. They could support him, of course, but mental health was tricky. It would be in all their best interests to get a professional opinion from somebody so they knew how to proceed.

But there were two reasons why they couldn't, the first one being the fact that they didn't have the money. They were already close to drowning as it was, and every dollar they spent was spent out of necessity. The second reason hurt to think about, but a blemish like that on Feliciano's medical record could eliminate the chance that they would be awarded guardianship in the upcoming legal battle.

Which is complete bullshit.

Antonio tugged at his own hair at the thought. He had been doing some research and had learned how impossible the odds were that Lovino would win the fight. After all, he was a financially unstable *foreign* teenager who had forged most of his documents in order to work. Cristiano wanted to take his son back to Italy, to his country of origin. Logically, it made sense. Of course the court would favor a father who was trying to do his best to make sure that his son was where he belonged.

If only they knew…

He had been there, he had seen the awful abuse that man put the two brothers through. Antonio had no idea why Cristiano acted the way he did except that he was probably some kind of sociopath. He used people to get what he wanted, and if they served no use then he would throw them away. From what Lovino had told him, that's what had happened with their mother. But Cristiano obviously wanted Feliciano for something, otherwise he wouldn't be there sneaking around and terrorizing them.

"Ugh, whatever." Antonio grumbled, too tired to keep up with the train of thought.

He let his head fall until it rested entirely on the table. Antonio sat like that, slumped over like a dead man, for a long time. To say he was exhausted was an understatement. Emotionally, he was spent, and it was with some worry that he felt old attitudes creeping in. Late nights always brought out the bleakest of thoughts, and despite his ability to ignore such dangerous mindsets, Antonio had negativity to spare.

Maybe this is God's way of punishing me...

That would be the twisted logic Antonio would have followed in his youth. His parents were devout catholics, and he had been too when he was younger. But they hadn't believed in things like mental illness, the result being a very confused (and depressed) Antonio. Add some very gay feelings for the neighboring Italian boy and boom, you've got a walking disaster — one that was *very* skilled at internalizing negative emotions.

But maybe I am being punished, why else would everything be so messed up right now?

Antonio groaned loudly in distress, trying to stop those intrusive thoughts. He was drifting off, only snapping out of it when Lovino made his way into the apartment.

"Welcome home." Antonio said tiredly, raising his eyes up with some effort.

"Idiot, what the hell are you doing?" Lovino huffed, shutting the door softly behind him.

Antonio shrugged, "Couldn't sleep."

"Obviously." Lovino said with a roll of his eyes. He kicked his shoes off and walked over to the kitchen, feet dragging the entire time.

"How was work?"

"Same shit, different day." Lovino grumbled, flinging open a cabinet in search of something to eat. He found it in the form of a sleeve of crackers, taking a handful before putting them back in place.

"Oh." Antonio whispered shortly, watching Lovino as he munched on his crackers. He still felt pretty down about his previous reflection, and he was trying not to succumb to hopelessness. Thus far, he'd been the anchor for their little family, a role he'd taken with pride. Antonio had done his best to be the unwavering voice of optimism, but he was growing tired. After all, even a rock can be grinded down into dust when faced with an ocean.

Lovino padded softly over, hovering over Antonio in mild concern, "Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

Everything.

“Bullshit, did something happen today?” There was a crease between his eyes, a rare look of blatant concern coloring Lovino’s features.

“No, I’m fine Lovi.” he lied.

Lovino ground his teeth in annoyance, “You always bitch to me about using my words, but how am I supposed to help if you won’t communicate with me?”

Antonio shrugged, too tired to really voice his rationale.

“All I’m saying is that you’re obviously thinking too hard about something. There’s a lot of shit happening right now, and I can’t have you shutting down on me over something stupid.” Lovino scolded.

He’s right, but I don’t want to bring him down with me.

Lovino had been through enough already, and Antonio didn’t want his mood or resolve to plummet on account of him.

“Oi, stop fucking thinking and just talk to me!” Lovino huffed as he crossed his arms.

Antonio jumped at the raised voice, “Ah, sorry Lovi but can you keep it down a bit? Feli’s sleeping and-”

“He’ll be fine, don’t change the subject. What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, I’m just tired.”

Lovino glared, “Fucking whatever. Let’s go to bed then.” he spun on his heel and disappeared into their bedroom, clearly pissed off.

Antonio sighed, “I’m just tired of it all.”

Nobody heard the forlorn words as he stood to follow Lovino, who was already changing into something more comfortable. He continued to ignore Antonio as he angrily shoved on a pair of sweatpants, grumbling softly under his breath.

Antonio sat delicately on the bed, curling his feet up beneath him as he absently watched his boyfriend change. He wanted to voice his concerns about Feliciano and what he had said the other day, but he was honestly too wrung out.

I’ll talk to Feli about it first before I get Lovi involved.

While that may not have been the best course of action, Antonio thought it was best not to get Lovino involved until he knew exactly what Feliciano had meant by his words.

Lovino walked to the other side of the bed and sat down heavily. He was angry, and Antonio shrunk away as he fought with himself internally.

Calm down, you're just tired. Lovi always gets in these moods, why are you choosing now to let it affect you?

While it was true that Lovino could easily slip in and out of his moods, Antonio wasn't in the right state of mind to deal with it at the moment. He needed to just sleep his own mood off, they had a battle to fight and Antonio really couldn't afford to shut down.

What's the point? Even if we win this fight, there will always be another one…

Antonio jerked his head up, trying to shake the traitorous thought from his mind. Lovino openly stared at him, a pensive look on his face.

No, they need me.

"Hey, Antonio." Lovino said with a poke to his shoulder.

But I'm so tired, why do I have to keep fighting?

"Oi, look at me!" Lovino yelled, now shaking his shoulder.

Antonio looked at him with a dazed look. They were laying on the bed together, just like an ordinary couple. Suddenly the hand on his shoulder burned.

This is wrong.

Those weren't his words, but his parents'. They had desperately tried to convince him that it was a mistake to fly across the ocean on a whim, turning on him the moment he made his intentions known. Antonio had been hurt by the biting words about his *'disgusting'* relationship, how he had betrayed his own family by defying them. There was a time when he had believed them, and it had almost killed him. Literally.

I was such a coward, I can't believe I-

"Toni!"

Antonio snapped out of that dangerous train of thought with a gasp. He met Lovino's wide eyes with his own when he felt a hand digging into his shoulder, "Lovi?"

"Talk to me. Now."

Antonio shook his head, trying to pinpoint why such intrusive thoughts were working their way into his brain now of all times. It wasn't like him to doubt his relationship with Lovino, at least not anymore.

What is wrong with me tonight?

"I'm sorry, just thinking is all." Antonio tried to brush him off.

"Well stop that." Lovino said with a huff, but that worry still marred his expression.

He nodded, laying tensely down. He felt Lovino lay down next to him, and Antonio unconsciously shied away when he tried to scoot closer.

Lovino froze in his actions, and Antonio felt like crying, “Sorry, I-”

“Okay, I think I know what’s wrong with you.” Lovino grumbled as he backed off.

“You don’t have to-”

“Shut it.” Lovino demanded with a glare, “You’re going to listen to me and not say anything until I’m finished, alright?”

Antonio nodded hesitantly.

“Good. First of all, stop thinking so damn much.”

“But-”

“What did I *just* say?” Lovino growled. Antonio sighed and let Lovino continue, “Like I was saying, stop thinking. I know it’s rich coming from me, but whatever thoughts you’re having are bullshit, okay?”

Antonio took in a breath as if to speak, but Lovino jumped in again:

“Second, it’s okay to not be so fucking positive all the time. Seriously, it’s exhausting to just watch you try to smile when you’re *obviously* stressed out.” Lovino rolled his eyes, though not unkindly.

Antonio took in the words, wondering if that’s why his thoughts had been getting away from him lately. It wasn’t healthy to ignore his emotions, but it was the only way he knew how to deal with them.

“Lastly, if you need space then just ask me.” Lovino struggled for a moment, trying to find a way to put his words delicately, “I know you don’t mean to, but it hurts when you just flinch away like that without telling me why.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t want to hurt you. I don’t know why I’m having all these thoughts right now.” Antonio breathed, fidgeting loosely with his hands.

“Well you’re obviously tired as shit.” Lovino said with a gesture to Antonio’s slumped posture on the bed, “And the past is back from the dead to haunt us all apparently.”

Antonio nodded, thinking that Cristiano’s return hadn’t sparked just the two brothers’ memories. It seemed his impact was much more far-reaching.

“Look, I remember how jumpy you used to be about… *us.”* Lovino pointed in between them, “But it didn’t scare me off then, and it’s not going to now. I’m about the fucking worst at communication, but I’m at least trying. I need you to try too.”

With a shaky breath, Antonio reached a hand out across the bed. Lovino took it, lacing their fingers together. It didn't burn so much anymore, "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Just don't forget that you're allowed to be selfish every once in a while. Honestly, let me be the one to take care of you for once, bastard." Lovino squeezed his hand, laying down on his side all while maintaining eye contact.

Antonio reached to the side so he could flip the lamp off, never letting their hands drop. It took some time, maybe even the better part of the hour, but he finally allowed his body to relax. Antonio scooted closer, burying his head under Lovino's chin. He reached a shaky hand up to rest on his chest, sighing in relief at the gentle heartbeat. Lovino wordlessly wrapped a comforting arm around him, further taking the edge off his earlier distress.

He felt the doubt that plagued him earlier dissipate, ashamed that he let such old feelings claim him. Antonio was supposed to be the rock that kept them grounded, but in reality he wasn't nearly as immovable as he would like to think. For years he never strayed from his parents and their strict guidance, never daring to form his own opinions. Then, in an act of extreme defiance, he had pushed everything they said to the wayside and ignored their warnings about living on his own.

I'm glad I didn't listen.

His family wasn't cruel, but their words had inflicted pain and confusion. Deep down they probably still loved him, but their blind devotion to a faith that Antonio had turned his back on meant that he would probably never reconcile with them. He had made his own family, one that he would give anything for.

Antonio had defeated his own demons years ago, although he still had intrusive thoughts from time to time. He'd found his own happiness and even though he was tired of the crappy hand he'd been dealt, Antonio refused to go back to the mess of uncertainty and self-destruction that he used to be.

Lovino brought a hand up and started playing idly with Antonio's hair. The action never failed to make him drowsy, and Antonio sighed in contentment. He was about to fall over the edge of consciousness entirely when a pair of lips pressed softly to the top of his head. He buried his head more securely into Lovino's chest, kicking his legs out to tangle them together.

His thoughts from earlier hadn't been his own, but the rigid teachings that had been drilled into him from an early age. They only whispered now, whereas before they had screamed. But whispers he could ignore, so he did.

Lovino was right, he could act a little more selfishly instead of shouldering everyone else's problems. With that thought in mind, he snuggled up closer to his boyfriend and drifted off completely.

A familiar ringtone blared obnoxiously from the nightstand, and Antonio groaned loudly in displeasure when Lovino disentangled their bodies to make a blind grab for his phone. He

had felt so secure, freed from his brief moment of despondency, but that damn phone once again obliterated the atmosphere.

Antonio peeled his eyes open, smiling at Lovino's tousled hair and annoyed scowl. He thought that everything would be okay, that he would be okay if he could just wake up every morning to this view.

"Hello?" Lovino asked blearily into the phone..

Antonio almost fell back asleep, mentally cursing the person who was keeping Lovino away from him. Hopefully, the conversation would be wrapped up soon.

"You're kidding me." Lovino said hollowly.

Antonio opened his eyes in concern, not liking the tone of voice his boyfriend had used. He looked up, noticing that Lovino had gone pale, a white-knuckled grip on his poor phone.

"You don't understand, I *need* this." he pleaded.

"Lovi?" Antonio asked, concern growing by the second.

"Please, you can't." Lovino's breathing was picking up.

Antonio put a nervous hand on his shoulder, trying to provide comfort.

"No, don't. Nobody has to know." Lovino brought a hand up to rub at his eyes. "Fine, whatever. Bye."

After he hung up the phone, Lovino simply stared blankly ahead. Antonio didn't know what had happened, but that look on his face was not promising, "Who was that?"

"My boss." Lovino's voice held no emotion.

The bar's not even open yet.

Antonio had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, "Why would they be calling you so early in the morning?"

Lovino's eyes swivelled slowly to meet Antonio's. They were wide and despondent, "They fired me. They may have to get the police involved."

"Police? Why?" Antonio asked in alarm.

"They found all the forged documents." There was still no emotion in his voice, and Antonio was getting seriously worried.

"Okay, we'll figure it out. How bad is the penalty for that anyways? A couple hours of community service or something?" was the hopeful response.

Lovino shook his head, "It's a felony."

Shit.

Chapter End Notes

Op, so that happened lol.

Sorry I kinda disappeared for a hot sec there, but I'm back! So I'm like really glad I have the chance to explore Antonio's character a little more. He's been like super optimistic this whole time, but I had a feeling that he was the type to ignore his own negative emotions. I could also see that being really bad for him, and as a kid that kind of stuff could lead to some serious mental health problems...

I just want to put it out there that I'm not bashing religion at all here. Antonio is simply a story of what happens when religion can fail you and is not representative of all faith.

Thanks so much for reading, and sorry for another mini cliffhanger lol. Let me know what you think of this chapter, or just the story in general! I love feedback, and I would like to make this story the best it could be.

I love all of you, bless up.

'Till next time!

Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino was a flurry of nervous activity, pacing from one side of the bedroom to the other. He had gotten over his emotionless state of shock fairly quickly as he contemplated what to do next.

Fuck! This cannot be happening right now.

But it was, and Lovino was at a loss for what to do.

“Okay, it’ll be fine. Right? I mean, they wouldn’t *actually* call the cops on you. Right?” Antonio asked, a slight panic to his voice. He sat on the bed as his foot tapped rapidly on the ground.

“I don’t know, okay? They said they had to think about things.” Lovino huffed as he continued to stomp.

The owner of the bar had said that Lovino had put them in a dangerous situation. If it had been found out that he was underage, then they could have been shut down. His boss had sounded pretty angry on the line, but had mentioned how Lovino had been a good employee. Therefore Lovino was left to wait to find out what his fate would be.

“What do we do?” Antonio asked.

Lovino stopped his pacing, trying to think clearly. He still may get out of this without the law involved, but the wait was bound to be agonizing. Right now what worried him more than anything was that they had rent due in a week, and they weren’t going to survive on one income.

“You need to go to work.” Lovino said decisively. Antonio was already shaking his head when Lovino cut in, “No, you’re *going* to work, got it? We have rent due in a week.”

Antonio sucked a harsh breath in, “We have enough saved, right?”

Do we?

They had been cutting it close every month for a while now, but losing a week’s worth of pay just might bury them completely.

Lovino sat down heavily on the bed, “We’ll manage.”

Antonio didn’t say anything to that, he just kept tapping his foot. An oppressive wave of silence settled over them as they both came to grips with what was happening and what it could mean for their future.

“How did they find out?” Antonio breathed quietly.

Lovino’s eyes snapped up, “I bet I know *exactly* who fucking snitched.”

Antonio’s eyes darkened in realization. Cristiano had made some pretty vague remarks about Lovino’s age, but he didn’t really think his father would be so cruel.

Who am I kidding? This is exactly the kind of underhanded bullshit he would pull.

With eyes fixed firmly ahead, Lovino tried to figure out his next course of action. There was a very real possibility that he would be arrested for this. Not only would that damn Feliciano to their father, but Lovino had no idea what that would do to Antonio. A directionless Antonio never boded well as he depended on his family, now more than ever.

With that thought in mind Lovino turned a very serious look to the Spaniard, “I need you to listen to me, alright?”

Antonio’s head shot up as he nodded eagerly, “Anything, what do you need?”

With a shaky breath, Lovino replied, “If I end up getting arrested, you and my brother need to leave.”

Antonio’s eyes swam in confusion, “Leave? What do you mean?”

Lovino looked down at his hands, not happy about even having to consider this, “I mean *leave.* Get as far away as possible and don’t let that fucker take my brother.”

Antonio brought a hand up to his eyes as he tried to scrub the tears away, “It won’t come to that, please don’t make me abandon you.”

Lovino shook his head, “You’re not abandoning me, I’m telling you to run. He wants to use my brother for something, I know it. There’s no other reason why he’d be here fucking everything up for us.”

“Yeah, but-”

“I’m not saying I’m gonna be arrested, but I need to know that if it happens then you’ll both be safe. Far away from here.” Lovino kept his eyes fixed on his lap.

Idiot, don’t make this harder than it needs to be.

Antonio grabbed Lovino’s hand in his own, trying to catch his eye. Lovino refused to look up but Antonio spoke anyway, “Okay, I will. But nothing’s going to happen.”

Lovino nodded solemnly, hoping that he was right.

The sound of feet shuffling down the hallway alerted both of them to the fact that Feliciano was awake. Lovino suddenly realized that life was going to keep pushing ahead, with or without him.

Shit, what do I tell Feli?

They had all promised to communicate more openly, and Lovino was about to be put to the test. He knew he couldn't keep hiding things, but it was still difficult.

As if reading his mind, Antonio spoke, "You're going to tell him, right?"

Lovino sighed heavily, "Yeah, but I need to make a call first."

Antonio nodded, giving him a quick peck on the cheek as he stood, "I'm proud of you. I'm going to start making breakfast. And Lovi?" Lovino brought his jaded eyes up, finding that Antonio had a look of fierce determination on his face, "It's going to be alright."

Lovino had to look away, but nodded as he heard Antonio walk across the room and close the door behind him.

Now left alone, Lovnio let out a heavy sigh. He still sat on the bed, flopping onto his back as he reached around blindly for his phone.

Maybe the loudmouth has some advice.

Lovino didn't particularly like Gilbert, not since he had denied him his brother's whereabouts that weekend. But he did rely upon him, and appreciated the lengths that the German had already gone through in order to help them. Lovino would go so far as to say that he even respected him, not that he would ever admit that outloud.

That idiot's ego is already big enough.

With a little huff, Lovino pulled up the correct contact and pressed call. It was only a few rings later when he got the groggy answer:

"Hallo?"

Lovino snorted, "Oi, wake up. I need some help."

Gilbert groaned in annoyance, "Do you have to be so loud?"

"I don't *have* to, no." Lovino said just a little too loud as he rolled his eyes.

"Y'know most people at least *try* to keep it down when it's *ass in the morning!"* Gilbert practically screeched.

Jesus, someone's clearly not a morning person.

"Not my fault you were probably trying to redefine what it means to be an alcoholic last night." Lovino snarked back.

"Alright, I'm going back to bed." Gilbert said angrily.

"No wait!" Lovino yelled.

"Was?! I'm trying to sleep!"

Lovino breathed in slowly and said in a much quieter voice, "Sorry, but I need help. I may have fucked up big time."

"What happened?" Gilbert asked in a serious voice.

"So you know how I work - worked - at a bar?"

"Uh-huh."

"And that I'm only nineteen?"

"Yeah, I was gonna ask how you-"

"I was fired."

The line was silent.

"Loudmouth?" Lovino asked nervously.

There was a drawn-out groan on the line, "They found out you're underage, didn't they?"

Lovino nodded his head, "Yeah, and that's not the worst of it."

"Don't tell me that you forged all your paperwork or something stupid." Gilbert asked with a little laugh. When Lovino didn't answer Gilbert said, "Wait, you didn't actually, did you?"

"Would you prefer I just lie to you and say no?" Lovino brought a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose as he tried to rub away the growing headache forming there.

"Fuck dude, that's not good." Gilbert sounded just as pained as Lovino felt.

"I know, and they said that they might call the cops on me, but they might not either. I just don't fucking know what to do anymore!" Lovino groaned in frustration.

"Well they probably won't call the cops on you if they haven't already, but I would have a nice heartfelt apology ready." Gilbert said.

Lovino nodded, feeling just a bit relieved, "Okay, I can do that."

"But you realize that this isn't going to look good on you when you go to court, right?"

"Do I even have a chance anymore?" Lovino asked quietly, fearing the answer.

Gilbert sighed, "Just how much of your paperwork did you forge?"

"All of it." Lovino said guiltily.

"Do you guys even have legal citizenship here?" Gilbert all but begged.

“Not technically, but-”

“Are you kidding me? How in the hell do you expect me to help you when you’re pulling all this shady shit? Seriously, if you get fucking deported or something then I’m gonna-”

“Oi, step off bastard! Roma was a citizen and we’re legal residents.” Lovino said with a scoff. “I just had to forge some IDs to change our names and ages so our asshole father couldn’t find us.”

That seemed to calm Gilbert down a little, “And that’s all you changed?”

“Pretty much, yeah.” Lovino said. He had changed some information about his name and age to keep away from his father, true. But another reason he had fudged some of the records regarding him and Feliciano was so they wouldn’t be separated. Feliciano was still a minor with no legal guardian, so of course he would have been whisked away to some foster home as soon as Roma’s eulogy was over. Lovino really had no choice at the time.

“Fine, whatever. So what’s your real name then?” Gilbert asked moodily.

“My name is Lovino Vargas.” he growled angrily.

“But it wasn’t always.” Gilbert pushed.

Lovino scowled, “What’s it to ya?”

Gilbert let out a long-suffering sigh, “Look, you’re asking for legal help here and I’m trying to give it. But I need to know the full picture in order to do that.”

He was right, Lovino couldn’t deny. Still, it hurt to admit it, “Valenti.”

“What?”

“Lovino *Valenti.”* he spat, not liking the way the name sat on his tongue.

“Got it.”

“I swear to God if you ever call me that-”

“Don’t worry, I don’t plan on it. Now, I have some exciting news for you.” Gilbert brushed off the previous conversation.

Lovino was glad for it, “What is it?”

“The awesome me has managed to set you up with a super awesome family attorney for free.” Lovino could only imagine the irritating smirk on the albino’s face right then.

“For free?” he asked in disbelief.

“Yup!” Gilbert chirped happily.

No shit?

“And how in the hell did you manage to pull that off?”

“I have my ways.” was the cheeky retort.

Lovino felt relieved by the little bit of good news, but he was still uneasy, “Does it even matter anymore? I broke the law, there’s no way I can win the case now.”

Gilbert hummed in thought, “Well normally I’d say you’re right. But I’m telling you man this guy I got for you is the best! He can turn any situation around for the better.”

“Even if I get arrested in the next couple of hours?” Lovino tried to mask his dread with sarcasm.

That sobered Gilbert up pretty quickly, “If you want my honest opinion, I don’t think they’re gonna call the cops on you. It’s a hassle for most people, and they could still end up in trouble if you accuse them of knowing that you were underage.”

“But Cristiano-”

“Is probably pulling some pretty shady shit too. Listen, only a coward would pull such an underhanded move. It sounds like he outed you, but he’s not going to confront you directly unless he absolutely has to.” Gilbert said logically.

“You don’t understand, he’ll do anything to get what he wants.” Lovino said rubbing his hand distractedly over a particular spot on his shoulder.

“I don’t pretend to understand, but I’ve seen *a lot* of custody battles in my time. He might try to bring this up in court, but it’s obvious how hard you’re trying to provide for Feli. Many judges look at that as a positive thing.”

“You’re optimistic today.” Lovino said with a small smile.

There was a soft rustle, like Gilbert was shrugging as he said, “One of us has to be. I don’t want you to lose Feli either, and to me it looks like your father is a coward.”

“You’re damn right he is.”

Gilbert laughed, “Alrighty, we’ll take everything one step at a time. Right now you need to smooth things over with your boss and find another job, like, as soon as possible.”

Lovino nodded, having already thought that, “Got it, what else?”

“I’m going to text you an address. Since you’re not working right now, I think I can get you in to see your new lawyer like really soon.” Gilbert said excitedly.

“Who the hell even is this guy?” Lovino grumbled softly.

Gilbert must have heard him, “Oh, his name is Tino! You’re gonna love him, don’t worry about it.”

Tino? What the hell kind of name is that?

“Okay, is that it?” Lovino asked, thoroughly exhausted.

Gilbert was quiet for a few seconds, “Pretty much. But, uh, how’s Feli doing?”

Lovino felt his defenses go up on instinct, but he forced himself to calm down, “He’s fine, why wouldn’t he be?”

Gilbert sounded tense, “I still don’t really know what happened the night I found him, and Ludwig was telling me that he doesn’t eat. And then those things he was saying about himself were just awful, and-”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it.” Lovino sighed as he squeezed his eyes shut guiltily. He was a little worried how this was the second time someone had brought up that his brother didn’t eat. Maybe it was about time he addressed it, “He’ll be okay. He ran away from home and ran into Cristiano on the streets. I’m guessing that’s when you found him.”

“That makes sense. Does he get them often?” Gilbert asked vaguely.

“Get what often?”

“Panic attacks.” was the blunt response.

Lovino groaned, “Yeah, far too often. He also dissociates when things are too stressful for him, it’s been that way ever since we were kids.”

“Thought so. Sorry to pry, I was just worried.” Gilbert was uncharacteristically subdued.

With a shrug Lovino answered, “Whatever. I’ve gotta go.”

“Yeah, me too.”

Lovino snorted, “You’re just gonna roll over and fall asleep, aren’t you?”

Gilbert had the nerve to sound offended, “Hey, I need my beauty sleep!”

“Clearly.”

“And what does that mean?” Gilbert growled.

“Nothing at all.” Lovino smirked.

“Why do I fucking bother?” Gilbert said under his breath, though it was accompanied by a soft chuckle.

The line was silent for a few seconds before Lovino finally worked up the nerve to say, “Thank you.”

“What was that?” Gilbert asked cheekily.

Lovino growled, “Nothing, bastard. I’m hanging up on you.”

There was a loud cackle, “You are very welcome. But seriously,” the laughter quieted down as Gilbert took on a serious tone, “stay safe. Call me if you need anything, alright?”

“Yeah.” Lovino nodded.

“I’ll text you the address, good luck.” were Gilbert’s final words as he hung up.

Lovino breathed out heavily, tossing his phone lightly to the side. While the albino was certainly a handful, he was at least useful. Lovino really didn’t know how to feel after the phone call. He felt hope when he learned that they now had a family attorney, and apparently a good one. Hopefully Gilbert was right about how he wouldn’t be in any legal trouble for the forged paperwork, although he still felt dread in the pit of his stomach.

With a sigh Lovino stood and quickly changed. He decided that after he walked Feliciano to school he was going to, as Gilbert put it, ‘smooth things over’ with his boss. But first he had to tell his brother what was going on, much to his chagrin.

Time to tell him how I failed. Again.

Lovino shook his head to himself before opening the door. He was hit with the smell of eggs as he made his way into the kitchen, finding Antonio cooking over the stove. Feliciano was sitting at the table, nodding off where he sat.

He does look skinny. Lovino thought worriedly as he truly looked at his brother. Cristiano had mentioned how underfed he looked, and apparently Gilbert shared the same concerns. Lovino mentally kicked himself for not noticing sooner.

“Morning.” Feliciano greeted tiredly.

Antonio turned his head over his shoulder and gave a tense wave. Lovino sat down at the table next to his brother, “Morning. Um, so I need to tell you something.”

Feliciano cocked his head curiously to the side, “What’s wrong?”

Shit, I’m the fucking worst at this! Lovino thought as he tried to figure out what to say, “Uh, so like don’t freak out or anything, but I was fired this morning.”

Feliciano’s eyes went wide in shock, “What? Why?”

Lovino rubbed the back of his neck nervously and looked at Antonio for guidance. Antonio simply nodded in encouragement and Lovino pouted a bit at the lack of help. He turned back to Feliciano and said, “They found out I was underage and threatened to call the cops on me.”

“What?!” Feliciano yelled. He looked terrified, and Lovino was desperately trying to calm him down.

Shit, why in the fuck did I say it like that? Fucking idiot!

“It’s fine, really! I don’t think they’re actually gonna do it. Seriously, everything’s going to be okay.” Lovino tried to placate, though he knew he wasn’t doing a great job. Antonio was the best at keeping the peace, but he currently seemed content to just watch from the side.

Fucking traitor.

Feliciano nodded, but his eyes betrayed the uneasiness there, “What are we going to do?”

Antonio looked at Lovino curiously, also anticipating the answer. Lovino gulped as he felt the pressure of the two stares directed at him, “I’m going to find a new job, hopefully before the end of the week.”

“We have to pay rent, don’t we?” Feliciano asked sullenly.

Lovino nodded, “Yeah, but you don’t need to worry about that.”

You shouldn’t have to worry about that.

Suddenly Feliciano perked up, “Wait a sec, I think I can help!”

Lovino watched curiously as Feliciano shot up from his seat and bolted into his room. Lovino shared a bewildered look with Antonio as Feliciano came barrelling back in, “Here.”

He handed Lovino what looked to be an envelope, “What’s this?”

Feliciano huffed, “Just open it.”

With one last curious look, Lovino unfolded the envelope. He was shocked to see that there was a check for nearly two-hundred dollars inside, “Where did you-”

“At the library!” Feliciano said proudly.

“Oh.” Lovino was dumbstruck. He had fought so hard to keep his brother from having to work for this very reason. Feliciano shouldn’t have to worry about paying rent or buying food, that was Lovino’s job. But now it seemed as if the tables had turned completely, and Lovino wasn’t sure how to handle it.

“Lovi? Are you okay?” Feliciano asked in concern. Antonio was also giving him a questioning look.

“What are you - oh.” Lovino brought a hand up to his cheek and realized that there were tears there. He rubbed them aggressively away.

Fucking pathetic.

“Sorry.” Lovino grit out, folding the check and putting it carefully in his pocket for later. Feliciano looked at him a little dubiously, but didn’t question him further.

Antonio suddenly cleared his throat, “Sorry to interrupt, but breakfast is ready.”

“Oh, I’m not hungry. Lovi can have it.” Feliciano said, moving to exit the kitchen.

“Oi, get back here.” Lovino said, though it lacked its normal bite.

Feliciano looked at him sheepishly, “Seriously, I’m not hungry.”

Liar.

“I’m calling bullshit on that. Sit down and eat.” Lovino said sternly.

Feliciano sighed heavily, but sat down.

Does he always refuse to eat?

Lovino was ashamed that he never noticed. His brother was painfully thin, and he only picked at his food when Antonio put it down in front of him.

With a sigh Lovino stood and poured himself a cup of coffee. Antonio moved to sit at the table, but Lovino caught his arm as he leaned in and whispered, “When’s the last time you’ve seen him eat a meal?”

Antonio looked shocked for a moment, eyes shifting to where Feliciano kept picking at his food obliviously, back to Lovino’s intense gaze, “Uh, I actually don’t know.”

Lovino released him, watching his brother thoughtfully. Feliciano only pushed the food around, not really eating it. Every once in a while he would bring up a portion of food to his mouth only to scrunch up his nose in disgust and put it back down. It was hard to watch, especially with how endless his appetite usually was.

How long has this been going on?

“Stop playing with your food.” Lovino said harshly, observing the reaction.

Feliciano flinched slightly at being called out, but he did take a bite of his food. Lovino kept his eyes fixed on his brother the entire time, and after a few more words of ‘encouragement,’ Feliciano managed to finish the whole plate, although he did look extremely queasy by the end of it.

“Can I get up now?” Feliciano asked, looking desperate.

At Lovino’s nod Feliciano shot up from his chair and bolted down the hallway. Lovino looked to Antonio in shock, “Is he alright?”

Antonio shrugged, getting up to follow Feliciano down the hallway. When neither one of them returned, Lovino got up and made his way down the hallway. He found them both in the bathroom, Antonio rubbing soothing circles on Feliciano’s back as he shivered on the ground. He had just thrown up his entire breakfast, and Lovino couldn’t help the wave of guilt that crashed into him.

“Shit, are you alright?” Lovino asked dumbly.

Feliciano groaned in pain, but gave a little nod.

“Okay, bad question.”

Antonio helped Feliciano stand as he made his way over to the sink. He rinsed his mouth out as Antonio flushed away the half-digested food. Lovino was alarmed to note that Feliciano’s face was white, “I’m sorry, you didn’t have to finish.”

Feliciano shrugged, “It’s fine, I guess I’m just a little sick.”

Lovino didn’t believe him, “I want you to be honest with me, alright?”

Feliciano nodded, a look of dread overtaking his features.

“When’s the last time you’ve eaten a full meal?”

There was nothing but silence as Feliciano started picking at his nails. Antonio seemed to hold his breath in anticipation, but it was obvious that no answer was forthcoming.

Lovino sighed, the silence answer enough, “Why don’t you go lay down, we’ll talk about it later.”

“But I have school-”

“And I’m telling you that you don’t have to go today. Besides, you look like shit.” Lovino said, taking in his still shivering frame and pallid complexion.

“Sorry.” he said meekly.

“It’s alright, I’ll be home all day anyway. I think we’ve earned a day off.” Lovino said with a sigh.

Feliciano nodded in agreement, eyes already drooping at the prospect of sleeping in. Without another word, he pushed past Lovino and turned down the hallway towards his room.

“Did you know he was going to throw that up?” Antonio asked angrily.

Lovino shook his head, “I had no idea.”

That seemed to calm Antonio down a bit, “Keep an eye on him today, I think we still have some crackers if he feels up to eating later.”

“Yeah.”

Antonio ran a hand through his hair but didn’t say anything else as he exited the bathroom. Lovino followed him into their bedroom, watching as Antonio changed into his work clothes.

“Are you okay?” Lovino asked, noticing the aggressive way Antonio was pulling on his clothes.

“I’m fine.” he said shortly.

Lovino snorted, “Clearly not.”

Antonio huffed loudly, “Well excuse me for not being okay after watching *that.”*

“And you think that watching my little brother throw up because his body’s not used to food anymore makes me feel good?” Lovino scowled in annoyance.

Antonio turned to face Lovino with a glare, “I never said it did. You’re the one that said that I don’t have to act so positive all the time, so let me be upset for once.”

Lovino really didn’t have a retort for that. Antonio had every right to feel upset about their current situation. Honestly it was a shock that none of them had cracked under the pressure.

Not yet.

With a final huff of annoyance, Lovino sat down on their bed. He looked on in silence as Antonio finished getting ready for the day. Eventually his glare started loosening, and it wasn’t long until he just looked sad. He could never truly be angry for long, and most of the time it was like an explosion: quick, aggressive, and usually painful. Luckily that didn’t hold true this time as Antonio’s shoulders slumped in resignation.

“I’m sorry, that was uncalled for.” he said softly.

Lovino snorted, “C’mon, you were hardly mad for more than ten minutes.”

Antonio looked at him questioningly, “What’s your point?”

“My point is that you deal with my bullshit constantly, but then act like you did something wrong when you’re justifiably upset.” he said as he crossed his arms.

Antonio smiled slightly at that, *“Lo siento,* I was just worried.”

“I know, I am too. Don’t worry about it, we’ll figure it out.” Lovino said with a little smirk.

“We always do.” Antonio responded with a half-hearted smile.

Not long later, Antonio left the apartment. Lovino cracked Feliciano’s door open and was relieved to find that he was already sound asleep. Lovino thought that a nap was definitely in order, especially given the dramatic turn of events that morning.

He knew that his boss wouldn’t be in until at least noon, and Lovino planned on sharing a *heartfelt apology.* But until then, he was determined to sleep off the stress. Maybe it wasn’t the healthiest way to cope, but dammit if Lovino wasn’t going to do it anyways.

With a shuddering breath, Lovino settled himself out on the couch. He still feared that he was going to be arrested for forgery, but there was nothing he could do but wait and find out. Without another thought, he laid down and tried to think of anything but their current situation. It didn’t quite work, but Lovino was finally able to catch a few fleeting hours of some well-deserved sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Woop here's a nice long chapter for y'all.

Thanks so much for reading! This story just keeps getting more and more dramatic lol. It's about damn time someone said something about Feli's poor eating habits like omfg. Also Lovi being the absolute worst at communication is the funniest shit to me. I don't know why, but like him trying to have an honest conversation with people and just failing is like so funny to me lol.

Translation:
Was - What

I appreciate all of you. Let me know what you think! Also, I've planned on having Tino as a lawyer since like chapter 2, so I am lit to bring him into the story. Any thoughts on that choice? Lol I'm shamelessly begging for feedback at this point.

Love you all, bless up and good night!

'Till next time!

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was off, and he knew it was obvious. From his pallid espression, to the slumped manner he walked, everything about his countenance screamed exhaustion. He couldn't help it, the stress of the last week or so was enough to nearly break him.

He'd miraculously managed to avoid any questioning from his brother the previous day, simply pretending to be too tired or stressed out to handle the dreaded conversation about his mental health. Lovino, who was painfully aware of how easily triggered his anxiety was, backed off immediately every time — something that was rather odd for his stubborn brother, but he was clearly still feeling the guilt of his mistake last week.

Despite the fact that he was relieved that he successfully avoided his brother for the entire day, it had created an atmosphere of awkwardness around them. Even the walk to school was tense with unasked questions, and Feliciano supposed he felt just a little bad about his blatant avoidance of the topic.

He sighed, leaning back against the cool lockers in the deserted hallway. Even though there was still that lingering awkwardness, that didn't stop Lovino from conducting a droning lecture about *eating properly* and the importance of a *good diet.* Feliciano was left at the school gate that morning with a bag overflowing with a ludicrous amount of food. He doubted that he could have finished it all even before he started skipping meals.

Does he really expect me to eat all this?

Feliciano eyed the food in his lap. It was mostly made up of cheap stuff like chips, a hastily-made sandwich, granola bars, some more chips and a whole host of other snacks.

'A good diet,' right?

He almost laughed at his own joke, but stopped himself before the sound could escape his lips. It's not like Feliciano was hiding per se, but he didn't exactly want to be found either. It felt like ages since he spent lunch alone in the hallway, but really it's only been a little under two months. Everything was now crashing down around him, making school seem more like an afterthought than anything. Out of habit, or maybe out of an embarrassing sense of nostalgia, Feliciano sat in the same hallway he met Kiku in.

He glared to himself at the thought.

Some friend I am.

Try as he might, Feliciano just couldn't force himself into the noisy cafeteria. It was too loud, too crowded, and every sound, color, and smell assaulted his senses until he thought he may suffocate.

Feliciano frowned, perplexed with how overwhelmed he'd been lately. He wanted to be able to sit with his friends — to laugh and be carefree — but he couldn't even bother to pretend that he was alright. It wasn't fair to them, so he was just going to avoid them until those bad feelings went away.

It was foolproof… right?

Shaking himself out of the thought-process, Feliciano looked back down to the bag of food in his lap. He was trying to figure out exactly where to start when the stomping sound of footsteps echoed dully throughout the hallway:

"Who does he think he is? Asshole, making me miss lunch…" grumbled an irritated voice.

Feliciano peered up, wondering who would be wandering the hallways during lunchtime, when his eyes sparked in recognition, "Alfred?"

"Huh? Who said that?" Alfred whipped his head around wildly, looking for whoever called out to him.

Feliciano actually did laugh at the sight, waving to grab the teen's attention, "I'm down here."

Alfred's head shot down, his posture relaxing when he finally noticed who had called out to him, "Oh, it's just you. I thought I was being haunted or something."

"Haunted?"

"Heh, well Mister Kirkland always talks to himself and stuff. Sometimes I think he's talking to someone, even when there's nobody there." Alfred rubbed the back of his neck, a light dusting of red across his cheeks. Feliciano nodded slowly, unsure how to respond to such a ridiculous claim. He was saved the effort as Alfred jumped in again, "So what are you doing out here, dude?"

Feliciano looked down, "Um, just eating lunch."

"Alone?" was the confused response.

"Yes?"

"Why?"

Feliciano shrugged, not knowing how to explain that he was a coward who couldn't handle a little noise from a cafeteria.

Alfred jut his bottom lip out in thought, snapping his fingers when he came to some sort of conclusion. In the next moment he was plopping heavily down against the lockers, a wide smile firmly in place as he shouted, "Then I'll just be alone with you!"

Feliciano's eyes blew wide open, "You really don't have to."

“You’re right, but I want to.” Alfred said with a sharp nod.

“Oh, um, thank you.” Feliciano whispered softly, truly meaning.

Alfred didn’t respond, though he did start nodding his head in time to some unheard melody. The silence would have been awkward with anyone else, but Alfred’s personality made quiet moments like these feel natural. Or, it was a quiet moment before his stomach started growling loudly.

He laughed sheepishly, “Ugh, sorry dude. I’m just hungry.”

“That’s okay, do you want some of my food?” Feliciano said with a soft smile.

Alfred perked up like an excited puppy, “Really? That’d be like so cool of you dude!”

Feliciano’s smile grew, offering the bag of food over so he could dig through it.

Alfred grabbed a bag of chips, but nothing else, “You’re gonna eat something too, right?”

“Uh, I already ate earlier.”

Alfred wasn’t buying it, a fact that showed clearly on his face, “Really? Well you could probably eat at least a granola bar even if you did eat. Here.” he shoved one of the granola bars into the nervous teen’s hands.

“I’m not hungry, I-”

“Eat.” Alfred commanded, not even looking up.

Feliciano slowly opened the wrapper and began eating, noting with some concern that Alfred shoved a bag of chips into his hands the moment he finished it.

“So do you always eat in the hallway?” Alfred asked suddenly.

Feliciano was still eyeing the bag of chips dubiously, but he answered anyway, “Uh, no. Not since the beginning of the year.”

“Gotcha, I thought I would see you by Kiku and… what’s his name? Really muscle-y, blonde, blue eyes-”

“Ludwig.” Feliciano finished sullenly.

Alfred snapped his fingers in recognition, “Oh yeah, that guy. You’re friends with them, right?”

With a soft nod, Feliciano mindlessly chewed on one of the chips. That was another thing he felt bad about — his relationship with Ludwig. Feliciano hadn’t been emotionally present lately with anyone least of all Ludwig, and he felt guilty that he couldn’t give more attention to stoic blond. It wasn’t fair to him, especially now when he had so many personal issues to work out.

Maybe I should just break it off now.

The thought hurt him, but it was something that weighed heavily on his mind nonetheless. He didn't want Ludwig to wait endlessly for someone that had so much baggage. Honestly, Feliciano wasn't exactly sure *why* the blond was with him at all — he simply rolled with everything, apparently unconcerned with all the drama around him.

It's too easy, something has to be wrong. Feliciano concluded.

"-so yeah, that's why I was held back by Kirkland." Alfred finished with a huff.

Feliciano jumped, realizing too late that he had tuned out the entire — unprompted — explanation from Alfred. He tried to play it cool, "Won't Matthew miss you at lunch?"

"Nah, he'll be fine. Besides, he's been ignoring me lately." Alfred sulked.

"Why?" Feliciano asked curiously.

"He says that I'm too loud and that he can't focus on studying or whatever. How dumb is that?" Alfred huffed.

Feliciano giggled, "Is that why he's in the library all the time now?"

"How did you know that?" Alfred asked suspiciously.

"I work there, and he said something about it." Feliciano laughed.

"It's not my fault the damn commie bastard is always picking a fight with me!" Alfred yelled.

Feliciano flinched a little at the volume, but he was interested, "Are you talking about Ivan?"

Alfred's face went just a little red, "Yeah, he's been over a lot lately and I think it's pissing Mattie off."

Really now?

"I thought you hated him." Feliciano teased.

Alfred visibly wrestled with himself before he answered, "I mean, I guess he's not *that* bad."

"Mm-hm." Feliciano smirked, noticing the way Alfred fidgeted.

"Stop looking at me like that! He's still a commie bastard that pisses me off, so there." he said childishly.

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me." Feliciano winked.

The resulting groan of distress only served to make Feliciano laugh a little louder. He reached down to grab another chip, only to realize that the bag was empty.

Alfred noticed too, trying to shove more food into his hands, but Feliciano was quicker:

“Why do you keep doing that?”

“Doing what?” Alfred asked innocently.

Feliciano glared, “Forcing food on me.”

“Uh, I’m not? It’s your food, dude, not mine.” was the flippant response.

Feliciano sighed “Well yeah, but I said you could eat it.”

“And I am.” Alfred held up the empty wrappers of food he already ate.

“Ugh, you know what I mean.” Feliciano grumbled. It wasn’t like he was offended or anything, but everyone seemed to be pushing food on him one way or another recently and he was sick of it.

“Look man, I’m gonna be real blunt here.”

Like you’re not already?

“I know it’s not my place, and I don’t know the situation, but you look like you’re being starved.” Alfred said candidly, concern marring his expression.

Feliciano looked down self consciously at his body, “I do?”

Alfred put his hands up, “Again, I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m calling it as I see it.”

Feliciano shook his head, “No, everything’s fine. I’m just not hungry.”

“Sure dude.”

This time, the silence that plagued them was awkward. Feliciano really didn’t know what the big deal was, but he didn’t want anyone to worry about him, “Uh, just things kind of suck right now?”

Alfred looked up hopefully, “Yeah?”

Feliciano nodded, “Yeah, we don’t have a lot of money so…”

With a satisfied nod Alfred responded, “Say no more, dude. That’s totally your business, but can I ask you an honest question?”

“Uh, sure?”

“Do you think your family or whoever you live with is more worried about money or you?”

That gave him pause. Feliciano wrestled internally with himself, hands fidgeting restlessly in his lap. Of course he knew the answer, and he knew what Alfred was getting at, but he didn’t know how to properly explain that his entire life was crumbling around him and this was how he could shed some of the guilt about being in the way.

Alfred took the silence as a permission to keep speaking, “Trust me, I get the whole not eating thing. I used to have a problem with it too, y’know?”

“Sorry, I know what you’re trying to tell me.” Feliciano mumbled.

But I still feel guilty.

“Well if you want my advice, talk to someone. For real, it helps a ton with whatever negative feelings you’re having.” Alfred said kindly.

He nodded in agreement, although that task was easier said than done.

Satisfied that his words were going to be seriously considered, Alfred stood with a languid stretch. With a relieved sigh, he reached a hand down and hoisted Feliciano up next to him, “I’ve gotta go find Mattie before the bell rings, so this is where I leave you.”

Feliciano nodded, “Thanks for sitting with me.”

“No problem, dude. Let me know if you ever want to talk about anything.” Alfred said with a bright smile.

“Yeah, see you later.” Feliciano nodded.

“Bye!” Alfred yelled as he bounded energetically down the hallway.

Feliciano sucked in a shuddering breath, contemplating what he should do for the remaining time he had left. He was just about to turn down one of the hallways, but a soft voice made him freeze:

“Over here, I found him.”

Both Kiku and Ludwig were speeding towards him, both wearing vaguely worried expressions.

Feliciano smiled, although it was shaky at best, “Hi guys.”

“Why didn’t you come to lunch?” Ludwig asked, straight to the point as always.

“Sorry, I don’t know why.” Feliciano mumbled sheepishly.

Kiku was clearly unimpressed with the answer, “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. I’m just tired is all.” Feliciano lied.

You’re still tired even after your nap in literature?” Ludwig teased with a fond roll of his eyes.

Feliciano smiled softly, relieved that he was given an out, “How do you expect me to stay awake, it’s so boring.”

“You’re in school, maybe you’d learn something if you paid attention.” was the stern, yet lighthearted, jab.

Feliciano stuck his tongue out childishly, “Well not all of us can be super-students like you.”

“Staying awake in class is the bare minimum, how does that make me a super-student?” Ludwig deadpanned.

Trying to keep that glare firmly in place, Feliciano crossed his arms in a huff. But Ludwig’s expression was immovable, and a traitorous smile predictably worked its way onto his face, “Don't be mean.”

Ludwig quirked an eyebrow up, “Run out of comebacks already?”

“Ugh, who taught you to be so sassy?”

“You have met my brother, right?” Ludwig asked seriously.

Feliciano couldn’t stop the resulting bark of laughter that bubbled up in his chest. It felt good to share such easy banter, and briefly he wished that his life could feel this simple all the time. His smile faded at the thought, suddenly feeling a wistful sort of nostalgia as he whispered, “I’m sorry.”

Kiku, who had been standing with a soft smile for a while now, spoke up, “What is there to be sorry for?”

Feliciano shrugged, “For not telling you guys what’s going on. I know I make you worry.”

“You don’t owe us an explanation.” Kiku said gently.

“I know, but I want to tell you. Just not right now.”

Kiku nodded, “Whenever you feel ready.”

Ludwig hummed in agreement, and Feliciano felt grateful for the infinite patience his friends were exhibiting. He was going to tell them, but everything was still too fresh, too painful. It was hard to believe that it had only been a week since Cristiano caused Feliciano’s world to fall around him — it really felt like so much longer, and he felt so much older than what he really was.

Feliciano jumped when the bell suddenly rang, thoroughly breaking him out of his pointless musings.

Ludwig, sharp as he was, put a hand on his shoulder in a comforting gesture, most likely figuring out the physical contact grounded him when he was anxious.

“Uh, thanks.” Feliciano muttered, cheeks feeling a bit warm at the contact.

Ludwig nodded before he let his hand fall away, and Feliciano wondered when their roles had changed. Before it had been Ludwig who was the bashful one, but now Feliciano felt like he

was rediscovering his feelings for the stoic blond.

“Um, I’ll see you in class?” Feliciano asked nervously.

“Ja, see you then.” Ludwig mumbled. He looked like he wanted to say more, but shook himself out of it before turning on his foot and shooting down the hallway.

Kiku sighed, “Please don’t make me go through this again.”

Feliciano watched Ludwig’s retreating form as he muttered, “What do you mean?”

“Are you two dating or not?” Kiku asked in exasperation.

“Uh, yes?”

Kiku looked irritated, “Then please, for the love of God, don’t go back to the awkward crush thing you two did before.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you in Art.” was the terse response, the quiet teen also retreating down the hallway.

What is he talking about?

Feliciano shrugged to himself, unable to decipher his cryptic friend. With a sigh he made his way down to his locker, shoving his extra lunch into it. There was still a granola bar left, and Feliciano thought briefly of what Alfred had said to him.

’Talk to someone.’

Well Feliciano needed to talk to Ludwig anyway, about everything. He might as well take Alfred’s advice and actually confide in someone for once, and Ludwig was probably the most neutral voice of reason that was possible.

Two birds, one stone.

With that thought in mind, Feliciano resolved himself to talk to Ludwig later. He stared at the granola bar for another second before he made a decision.

I want to get better.

He threw away the empty wrapper on his way to his next class.

Chapter End Notes

Yo. So I know that not a lot happens here, and that it's short, but I feel like I've deprived y'all of a chapter for far too long. I wanted to make this a little more lighthearted since

the story has been (and will be) down in the dumps.

Thanks so much for reading, it makes my heart happy. Let me know what you think! Any critiques, predictions, or nothing at all - you do you ;)

Love y'all so much, stay beautiful my lovelies <3

'Til next time!

Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino squinted down at his phone, trying to confirm if he was in the right place. True to his word, Gilbert had sent him the address of an office. It was the day after he got that cursed call informing him of his newfound unemployment status. Luckily he was able to talk his boss out of getting the law involved, Elizabeta had even spoken up for him. But that didn't make him feel much better as it was obvious who had ratted him out.

With a sigh Lovino decided to shrug off the thought for now. It wouldn't help to be pessimistic before he even got the chance to meet their new lawyer. There would be time to despair after - *if* - he was delivered the bad news after this appointment.

Lovino took a deep breath and pushed the door open. He was met with a small reception room. There were a few chairs that lined the beige walls with some potted plants scattered sporadically around the room. At the end of it sat a young woman behind a tall desk. Lovino approached, and the woman looked up with a smile:

"Hi there! How can I help you?" she asked brightly.

"Uh, I have an appointment." Lovino said, shifting from foot to foot.

The lady nodded, "You're here for Mr. Väinämöinen?"

Lovino furrowed his eyebrows.

Mr. who now?

The woman must have seen his confusion, "Tino, right?"

"Oh, yes." Lovino said.

"Can I have your name, please?"

"Lovino Vargas." he responded.

Without another word she picked up a phone and exchanged a quick conversation with someone. Before Lovino could blink, she put the phone down and said, "He's ready to see you now. Go down that hallway and it's the second door to your right."

Lovino nodded in appreciation, "Thank you."

"You're welcome!" she chirped, instantly getting back to work.

Lovino made his way down the hallway, hands fidgeting awkwardly. He was completely out of his element here. Usually he was the one breaking the law, not seeking out a legal

professional for help. But Gilbert had spoken highly of this person, and Lovino couldn't see any other possible way to win in court unless they had a professional.

Finally he made it to the correct door. With a shaky breath, Lovino brought his hand up and knocked. He cringed at how loud it sounded to his own ears, but stood patiently outside the door as he waited.

Suddenly, there was the sound of thundering footsteps rushing towards him. It was coming from the other side of the door, and Lovino was contemplating taking a step back when it was whipped open. In front of him stood a short blond, his hair so light it was almost platinum. He was small, but the way he held himself made him seem so much bigger. He had kind, inviting eyes, and a beaming smile coloured his expression.

"Hi! You must be Lovino, yes?" he asked brightly.

Lovino was taken aback by just how young he looked, "Uh, yeah."

Is this really who the loudmouth recommended to me?

"It's nice to meet you! You can call me Tino." he offered one of his hands, and Lovino reached out his own to shake it. "You can come in, sorry it's a bit of a mess right now."

Tino scurried in, followed closely by Lovino. The office wasn't *a mess* as Tino had put it, but there were a few papers laying haphazardly around and the clock on the wall was just a little crooked. Hell, if this was messy then their apartment could be considered a disaster zone.

"Go ahead, take a seat." Tino said as he took his own behind the desk. It was a small office, a few filing cabinets off to the side. There was a mini fridge too, and everything looked meticulously cared for. The dark wooden desk accented the warm velvety red color of the room, and a large window let in sunlight, creating an open and inviting feel.

"Thanks." Lovino muttered, sitting gingerly on the cushioned seat.

Tino smiled, "Do you want anything to drink? I have water, coffee, and I think I have soda too if you'd like."

Lovino shook his head, "I'm alright."

With a nod, Tino leaned back in his chair as he got to business, "Okie dokie then. So Gilbert told me a little bit of your situation, but I'd like to hear it from you."

"What do you need to know?" Lovino asked.

Tino hummed in thought, "Whatever you want to tell me. You're trying to become a legal guardian for your brother, right?

Lovino nodded, "Yeah, but I'm not sure if it's even possible."

"And why's that?"

Because I'm a massive fuck-up.

That's what Lovino wanted to say, but he was making an honest effort to keep it professional. At least for now, "Uh, well some things may have happened recently that might have caused me to lose my job."

Tino tapped his finger thoughtfully against his chin, "Is that your only concern?"

I wish.

"I also forged some paperwork that was recently found out, I'm broke, we're not even from this country, and I'm only nineteen." Lovino said sullenly.

"Ah, that does sound pretty dire."

Lovino deflated at the words, even though he expected them.

There really is no chance then.

"But we're still going to try." Tino said with a fierce smile.

"What?" Lovino asked dumbly.

Tino crossed his arms, "We're going to fight. Nothing's impossible. Now, tell me about your brother."

Lovino sat in shock for a few seconds, trying to process what he was just told. Even after he had told Tino every reason why he wasn't going to win the case, he still wanted to try. There was a tiny flicker of hope in his chest, "His name is Feliciano and he's sixteen."

"Really? That's interesting. Why are you seeking custody now?" Tino said as he wrote something down.

Lovino wanted to know what was so interesting about that, but he decided to push it to the back of his head for now, "That's a bit of a long story."

"That's what we're here for!" Tino chirped.

Lovino nodded slowly, deciding to give the short version, "Well we lived with our grandfather until a couple of months ago when he passed away." Tino made a little noise, probably the beginnings of a condolence, but Lovino cut it off, "We moved here to try to start over. But our father found us, and he said he wants to take my brother back to Italy."

Tino was still writing furiously, "And your father currently has custody?"

Lovino nodded, "Yeah."

"And why is that a problem?" Tino cocked his head to the side.

Because he's a piece of shit that can go and fucking die for all I care.

Lovino crossed his arms across his chest defensively, “Because he just wants to use my brother for something. He’s an abusive asshole, and I don’t want him anywhere near us.”

Tino nodded, “What does he want to use your brother for?”

“Wish I fucking knew.” Lovino grumbled, his pretense of professionalism falling.

If Tino was bothered by the swearing, he didn’t show it, “Okay, we’ll talk about that later. Can you explain what you mean by abusive?”

“Pfft, where do you want me to start?” Lovino asked flippantly.

“Wherever you want. I need the full picture to build a convincing case, so if he was abusive then anything that incriminates your father will be helpful.” Tino said, hand gripping his pen as he prepared to scribble down more notes.

Lovino sighed, not liking to talk about it. He hated the pity, but at the same time he realized the necessity of bringing it up, “He would hurt us, most of the time over stupid things. He also loved to yell.”

Tino nodded softly, his expression subdued, “How would he hurt you?”

Lovino shuddered, “Most of the time he would just push us into things. Sometimes into the wall, one time down the stairs. I remember a huge fight we had where a glass table was involved.” he paused, trying to expel the memory of *that* particular event before he continued, “But the worst was when he smoked.”

“Why’s that?” Tino prompted gently.

Lovino started fidgeting with his hands, “My brother got it worse than me, but sometimes he would put out the cigarettes on our skin.”

Tino didn’t react, he just kept writing. Lovino really did hate talking about this, in fact he tried to ignore their past entirely. But that was impossible now and if there was a chance he could incriminate his father with what little evidence they had, then he wasn’t going to hold back.

“And what about your mother?” Tino asked curiously.

Lovino cast a smoldering glare at the desk in front of him, "Gone."

With a final swipe of his pen, Tino looked back up, “What kind of evidence do you have of all this?”

“Uh, just some scarring. Feliciano has a bunch on his arms.” Lovino said as he absentmindedly rubbed at his shoulder.

“What sort of things would he yell at you about?”

Lovino looked up at the ceiling, lost in thought.

What wouldn't he yell at us about?

With a shuddering breath he responded, "Just stuff about us being worthless, mistakes, ungrateful. You know, the usual load of garbage. I'm over it, but that stuff really got to my brother."

"How so?" Tino pushed.

Lovino sighed, "He really took it to heart. I'm pretty sure he still believes those things about himself, that's probably why he's so damn anxious all the time."

Tino hummed in thought, "Is mental health a concern with him?"

"Thanks to that bastard showing up it is. It's gotten worse ever since he started harassing us." Lovino huffed angrily.

"He's been harassing you?" Tino said as he started writing once more.

Lovino groaned in frustration, "Yeah, it started with phone calls. Then he had the fucking nerve to corner me at work, and then basically threaten my brother."

"Threaten?"

"Yeah, grabbed his arm and everything. Left a bruise, too." Lovino said as he crossed his arms in irritation.

Tino looked up, "Did you take a picture?"

Lovino shook his head, "No. Should I have?"

"Yeah, we can use that. Is the bruise still there?"

Lovino shrugged, "I don't know, but I can look tonight."

"Please do. I also want details about your conversation with your father, but that can wait until next time we meet." Tino said decisively as he turned over the paper he was writing on.

"Fine by me." Lovino said, annoyed even thinking about the interaction.

"So you lost your job, right? Do you have any income coming in right now?" Tino asked, changing the direction of their conversation.

"Yeah," Lovino shifted awkwardly, "my brother has a job and we live with someone else too."

"What's your relation to this person? Roommate?" Tino asked.

"Uh, no. We're kind of in a relationship…" Lovino trailed off.

"Oh! So you have a girlfriend, that's-"

“No, not a girlfriend. *His* name is Antonio.” Lovino crossed his arms, annoyed for some reason.

Tino looked a little shocked, “Oh, I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to just assume.”

Lovino huffed, “Yeah, whatever.”

Completely undeterred, Tino continued on, “So you do have an income, that’s good. But it’s going to be in your best interest to find a new job as soon as possible.”

“I know, I’m working on it.” Lovino said.

Tino nodded, “Good. Why did you lose your last job?”

This was a topic that Lovino dreaded, “Uh, like I said, I forged some paperwork so I could get a job. The bar I worked at found out that I was underage and fired me.”

“Is that it?” Tino asked curiously.

Is that it? I broke the fucking law.

“What do you mean?” Lovino asked instead.

“Well what you did was illegal, but there was a good intention behind it. Now, I’m not saying that you should have done it and that it won’t come up in court, but that’s really not the worst I’ve ever heard.” Tino said with a smile.

Lovino sat in disbelief, “So we still have a case?”

Tino looked at him in confusion, “Of course. Believe it or not I’ve seen people get away with way worse and still win their case. I may have to spin it a bit, and I can’t promise anything, but there’s a chance.”

Lovino released a breath he didn’t know he was holding, “Oh.”

“Now, what questions do you have for me?”

Currently, Lovino had about a million questions. However, instead of bombarding Tino with all of his uncertainties, he asked, “What do I do next?”

“Well unless there’s anything else you want to do first, we can file a formal dispute and get this case rolling.” Tino said brightly, already moving to one of the filing cabinets to retrieve some paperwork.

The next hour or so consisted of Tino helping Lovino fill out all the proper paperwork. There were still a lot of questions that raced through Lovino’s mind, but he was able to push them aside for the time being.

“That should be good for now. Can we set up another appointment to hash out some of the details?” Tino asked as he neatly gathered the documents on his desk.

“That’s fine.” Lovino said as he rubbed his eyes. He was surprised with just how exhausted he felt after simply filling out some papers.

“Perfect. Here’s my card, and I already have your number.” Tino handed over one of his business cards. “Do you have any more questions?”

Lovino accepted the card as he thought about it. He realized that he did have one question that he was itching to have answered, “Why are you helping us?”

“Hmm? It’s my job!” Tino said warmly.

“But you don’t even know us, and you agreed to meet on such short notice. And the loudmouth said you weren’t going to charge us. People aren’t that nice in real life.” Lovino all but accused.

Tino looked at him curiously before something seemed to register in his brain, “Loudmouth? Is that supposed to be Gilbert?” he laughed loudly, ignoring the other accusation.

“I’m not wrong, am I?” Lovino grumbled.

Tino had to wipe away a tear as he continued to laugh, “No, you’re not wrong.” He was finally able to get a grip as he smiled softly at Lovino, “Honestly, I owe Gilbert a favor. He helped me in an adoption case a little bit ago. It’s still ongoing, but it’s as good as over. Besides, I really do like helping people.”

This guy cannot be real. Lovino thought as he marvelled at Tino’s niceness.

“Thanks then, I guess.” Lovino said as he stood.

Tino stood as well, offering a hand, “Not a problem. I look forward to working with you! We’ll be in contact.”

They shook hands and Lovino exited the office feeling marginally better. Tino hadn’t guaranteed victory, but he also hadn’t sealed their fate. Even if they only had a snowball’s chance in hell, Lovino was going to take it. They had no other choice.

With a short wave to the receptionist, he exited the building. There was still a couple hours left until Antonio and Feliciano came back home, so Lovino decided it was time to do some job hunting. With that thought in mind he walked down the street with his head held higher than it had been for a long time.

Chapter End Notes

Heyo! So I figured something out: I've been super busy and it's been taking longer for me to get chapters out. But, I've found that I can get them out pretty quickly, but they're

gonna be just a bit shorter. Are y'all cool with that, or would you prefer I just take the time to make longer chapters and maybe post less?

Anywho, thank you so much for reading! I love Tino, and I'm lit af to bring him into the story. I'm gonna ask ya'll to grant me some creative freedom with the law here. Trust me, I've researched the hell out of it, but it's still kind of sketchy in a lot of ways. Since their first meeting is more like a 'get to know you and your situation' type consultation, I'm not too worried about inaccuracies here (pls correct me if I'm wrong!)

Let me know what you think! Y'all have been too kind to me in the comments already, like seriously it is literally so sweet how nice you guys have been :)

That's all I got. I love you all, thanks for sticking around this long!

'Til next time!

Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio waited nervously at the front gates of the school. He had made the effort to be early, trying to think of the proper way to bring up his concern to the fidgety teen.

He probably didn't mean it, but I have to be sure.

The remarks Feliciano had made were worrisome to say the least, and Antonio knew he had to say something for his own peace of mind. It was just so frustrating. They had all fought hard for peace in their lives, and they found it for four blessed years. It was hard to stay optimistic in a world that was hellbent on reminding them that tragedy and heartbreak always lurked just around the corner.

Antonio sighed, thinking that maybe he was just being dramatic. A cool wind blew through, the days growing shorter and colder with each sunset. He crossed his arms across his chest in an effort to stay warm as students began pouring out of the school. Antonio squinted, looking for a certain Italian. Finally, he emerged from the throng of restless students.

Antonio waved him over, "Over here!" Feliciano's face lit up as he spotted him, rushing over. Antonio smiled warmly, "Hey, how was school?"

Feliciano smiled, "It was good! How was work?"

"It was alright." Antonio said as he began walking down the sidewalk. "Speaking of work, when are you scheduled at the library next?"

"I'm going in tomorrow. Also, is it alright if I go over to Ludwig's for a bit afterwards?" Feliciano asked, falling in step.

Antonio hummed in thought, "Depends, how late are you planning on staying out?"

"Not that late." Feliciano rushed out. "I only work until seven, so I'd probably be back around nine."

"Hmm, well I don't have a problem with it, but you're gonna have to make sure with Lovi." Antonio said.

Feliciano smiled, "I will!"

Antonio nodded before he bumped into Feliciano's shoulder playfully, "So you and Ludwig, yeah?"

Instead of the nervous laughter or fidgety hands that Antonio expected, Feliciano seemed to deflate, "Yeah."

Oh no, did something happen?

Antonio had rather liked the awkward blond when they had briefly met. Maybe it was because of the way Feliciano lit up around him, or maybe it was because the German's intimidating stature scared away anyone who meant either of them harm. Or it could be because he, unlike Lovino, actually liked Gilbert, and maybe Antonio just liked Ludwig too by association. Whatever the reason, Antonio didn't want any more hurt to come to Feliciano, and especially not right now when everything was crashing down around them.

"Are you guys doing okay?" Antonio asked lightly.

Feliciano cast his eyes to the ground, "I don't know."

Well that wasn't an encouraging answer, "That's okay not to know. Relationships are tricky, especially at your age." Antonio said, unable to think of anything else.

Feliciano looked shocked, "Wait, you know?"

Too late Antonio realized that Feliciano never told him about his relationship with Ludwig. Even though it was obvious to anyone with a brain that the two were more than friends, Lovino had wanted to play dumb to it until Feliciano brought it up himself.

Oops.

With a nervous chuckle Antonio said, "Yeah, sorry. You two were kind of obvious."

Antonio expected some level of distress or annoyance from the Italian, but what he wasn't counting on was embarrassment, "Ugh, why does everyone keep saying that?"

His cheeks were red, and Antonio couldn't hold back his laughter, "Because you were. Did you really think you were being subtle?"

"Yes?" Feliciano said, though he sounded uncertain.

Antonio shook his head a bit, "Sorry to break it to you Feli, but I knew something was up when you came back home redder than a tomato. Why do you think Lovi had me take your phone every night?"

Feliciano scowled to himself, "He said it was because I need to actually sleep at night instead of texting."

"Because he knew exactly who you were texting." Antonio said with a nod.

"Lovi knows too? *Dio,* does the whole world know?" Feliciano asked in exasperation.

Antonio truly laughed at that. While it wasn't his intention to make fun of Feliciano, the fact that he really thought he was being subtle was hilarious to him. It kind of reminded him of how he and Lovino had danced around each other, each thinking they could hide their feelings for each other behind petty fights and awkward silences.

Spoiler alert: it didn't work.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh." Antonio said, finally getting a grip over himself. He wiped a tear away before he said much more seriously, "If it makes it any better, we both support you. I'm glad you're happy."

Feliciano looked away at that, "Thanks."

The light atmosphere dissipated at the lackluster response, and Antonio was suddenly reminded of his earlier worry, "Hey, are you alright?"

Feliciano sighed, redirecting the question as he asked, "How did you make it work with Lovi?"

Well that was certainly not what Antonio was expecting, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know." Feliciano groaned in frustration, "I remember how it was back in Italy, like you both wanted nothing to do with each other but everything to do with each other at the same time."

Antonio's eyes widened a bit in shock, realizing how accurate that statement was. Their relationship, for a number of reasons, got off to a rocky start. They were neighbors back in Italy, and they had played a frustrating game of cat and mouse with each other — Antonio could never figure out who had which role.

With a sigh Antonio said, "I really don't know how we made it work. It just kind of happened."

Feliciano glared, an expression that Antonio was wholly not used to on the younger, "I don't believe you."

Where is this coming from?

Antonio looked at him curiously, "You don't have to, but what does this have to do with anything?"

Feliciano looked frustrated, "I don't know, I just feel like this relationship we have isn't real."

"What do you mean by that?" Antonio asked in confusion.

"I mean I don't really know if Ludwig has feelings for me. He just kind of goes along with everything. It feels too easy." Feliciano said, clearly distressed.

Antonio couldn't really fathom why, "How is that a bad thing?"

"It's not I guess, but I think that I may have jumped into this too quickly." Feliciano started picking at his nails nervously.

"Why do you feel like that?" Antonio pushed.

“Well I know that I’m emotional and I get excited really easy. I’m also annoying, so when people like me anyways I get really attached.” he said sullenly.

Antonio didn’t like where this was going, “So you think that your feelings towards Ludwig aren’t real?”

Feliciano hung his head, “Maybe they’re not. What if I’m just using him? What if he’s with me out of pity? I mean it doesn’t feel like we’re in a relationship. I feel like we’re just friends so what’s the point of the title?”

“Hmm, well I hate to break it to you, but that’s what a relationship is.” Antonio said lightly.

“What?” Feliciano looked up, something akin to hope in his eyes.

Antonio breathed out a little laugh, “You said you just feel like friends and that it feels easy. What do you think it means to be in a relationship? Do you think you have to proclaim your undying love for each other for your feelings to be real?”

Feliciano’s shoulders slumped, “No, I guess not.”

“Right. And you’re not annoying. You gotta give yourself some credit here, don’t just assume Ludwig’s with you out of pity. Talk to him. Any good relationship has open communication.” Antonio said matter-of-factly.

“I guess.” Feliciano said. Suddenly he must have thought something because he turned to Antonio with a curious gleam in his eyes, “So how did you and Lovi end up together? He’s horrible at communication and I really did think you guys hated each other for a while.”

So did I.

Antonio remembered his life in Italy, how much he had hated it. The only thing that really made it bearable were the two brothers. They were neighbors in a relatively rural area, so company was hard to come by. Lovino, while never openly hostile, didn’t trust anyone and least of all Antonio. It took years for them to really get along, even though they were around each other so often.

He looked back at the time, realizing just how long it took for them to really talk. It took at least a year for them to tolerate each other, and one more to become friends. It had taken a lot for them to get through to each other, but towards the end of their time in Italy, they had grown inseparable. In a sense, they always had been, but it was only in the last year when they could both speak to each other long enough to actually talk about their feelings. After some embarrassing attempts to gain the fiery Italian’s affections, the two had started dating and the rest is history.

With a fond smile, Antonio turned to Feliciano and asked, “Do you remember the first thing Lovi said to me when I first moved next door?”

Feliciano shook his head.

“Ah, well you were really young I guess.” Antonio said, eyes clouding over in memory, “We had just moved from Spain and we went over to your house to introduce ourselves. I went up to Lovi and tried to introduce myself in Italian.”

“Oh no.” Feliciano started laughing, knowing exactly where this was headed.

Antonio started laughing too, “Yeah, I was even worse at it back then than I am now. As soon as I was done, Lovi looked at me and said, *‘Your Italian sucks. Don’t talk to me until you can speak it correctly.’* ” he mimicked Lovino, absolutely nailing his scowling face and growling voice.

Feliciano tried to muffle his laughter, bringing a hand up to his mouth. Between fits of giggles he said, “No offence Toni, but your Italian still sucks.”

Antonio pouted, “It’s better than your Spanish.”

“Sure it is.” Feliciano said, clearly not believing him.

“Whatever, the point of the story wasn’t to make fun of me!” Antonio said, trying to get their conversation back on track.

“Sorry, keep going.” Feliciano said with a wide grin.

With a huff, Antonio continued, “Anyways, Lovi wasn’t exactly a welcoming face in a completely foreign country. He would always argue and yell, and I would fight back. I’m pretty sure that that pissed him off more than anything.”

“Oh, it did.” Feliciano said with a smirk. “He would go on long rants about you. I swear he was obsessed.”

Antonio chuckled, “I don’t doubt it. Really it was thanks to you that we started getting along.”

“Really?” was the shocked response.

“Yeah,” Antonio said with a nod. “You were always so friendly and sweet, of course I couldn’t help but care for you.”

Feliciano laughed nervously, “You were really nice to me. It was nice to be able to trust someone for once.”

Antonio nodded sadly, “Yeah, well Lovi didn’t like that. At least, not at first. He was so protective of you, I think he resented me a bit for gaining your trust so easily.”

“Yeah, that sounds about right.” Feliciano huffed fondly.

“But at the end of the day, it was because of you that we spent more time together.” Antonio smiled. “I guess where I’m going with this is that relationships are messy. You can’t give up on them without trying first. I mean, I never would have thought that Lovi and I would end up together, and we wouldn’t have unless we talked.”

Feliciano nodded his head in resignation, “I know, it’s just hard.”

“Trust me, I know. Do you remember what my parents were like at all?” Antonio asked, feeling his chest grow heavy as he used this opportunity to delve into the dreaded topic he had been meaning to bring up since the beginning.

“Uh, kind of. They weren’t around a lot, were they?” Feliciano asked.

Antonio sighed, “It depended. They worked a lot so you probably didn’t get to really meet them.”

Feliciano shook his head.

“Well, if you remember, I wasn’t exactly nice to Lovi either.” Antonio said with just a touch of shame.

I was actually pretty mean.

They kept walking, Feliciano waiting expectantly for the continuation. With a shuddering breath, Antonio went on, “I realized that I had a crush on him for a while, and it almost killed me.”

Feliciano’s breath caught in his throat, “Is that why-”

“I stopped talking to you guys? Yeah. My family is super religious, and I was too.” Antonio struggled with himself for a few seconds. He had poured his heart out to Lovino over this very topic before. But besides what he had seen firsthand, Feliciano really didn’t know about this side of him. He knew enough to know that he had demons, but it had been years since Antonio’s made them known.

“I remember that. You went to church twice a week, right?” Feliciano asked.

“Yup.” Antonio popped the ‘p,’ trying not to dwell too heavily on just how religious he used to be. “I wasn’t in a great state of mind, so I went to my parents for help.” he laughed humorlessly.

‘Cause that was a good idea.

“I started isolating myself from everybody. I hated myself and I ended up taking some… drastic actions as a result.” Antonio rubbed at his eyes, trying to expel some of the negative emotions he was dredging up from his memories. “I convinced myself that everyone would be better off without me.”

Feliciano audibly gulped, hearing his own words echoed in Antonio’s, “But you don’t feel like that anymore, right?” he asked with just a bit of desperation edging his voice.

Antonio gave a small smile, “No, I don’t. I still get sad sometimes, but I know that I can talk to Lovi about it. But do you know what I’m getting at here?”

“Yeah.” Feliciano said in a small voice. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“I know you didn’t, it’s okay. But can you explain what you meant when you told me that you thought that everyone would be better off if you were gone?” Antonio turned his head, trying to make eye contact but Feliciano avoided him.

“Um, I don’t want to… to kill myself if that’s what you’re worried about.” Feliciano fidgeted nervously.

Antonio breathed out a sigh of relief, “So what did you mean?”

Feliciano looked nervous, “I mean it was just everything that’s been happening. I know he was just trying to manipulate me, but I, uh, kind of agree with some of the stuff our father said about me.”

Antonio could already feel white hot fury coursing through his veins, “Which stuff?”

“I mean just the stuff about being in the way and whatever. I know it’s stupid and that I shouldn’t believe it, but I can’t help it.” he said sullenly.

“I don’t think it’s stupid. You were told those things your whole life, I don’t expect those feelings to go away overnight.” Antonio said, trying to sound reasonable.

“But it hasn’t just been one night. It’s been *four years.”* Feliciano said in the most agitated tone Antonio had ever heard from him.

“And the things you lived through for the other twelve years can stick around for a lifetime.” Antonio said a little more aggressively than he meant.

Feliciano backed off immediately, “You think I’m going to feel like this my whole life?”

Shit.

His eyes were growing watery, and Antonio felt guilt crash into him. He tried to backtrack, “No, that’s not what I meant.”

“But that’s what you said. I mean you told me that you still got sad even though you’re better. Does that mean I’m still going to feel bad too?” Feliciano asked despondently.

Antonio dragged a hand through his hair, “I’ll be honest with you, I really don’t know.”

Feliciano watched him attentively, looking for answers that Antonio wasn’t sure he could give.

I’m sorry, I don’t know how to make you feel better.

Antonio looked down resolutely, offering the only words of comfort he could think of, “I don’t know, but I think it’s worth it to find out for ourselves.”

Feliciano swiped at his eyes, but nodded slowly, “I hope so.”

Me too.

Antonio reached an arm out and draped it around Feliciano's shoulders as they continued to walk, feeling some tension leave his body at the contact.

The silence that surrounded them should have felt awkward, but it didn't. There was simply nothing more to say, and both of them realized it. Even as they ascended the stairs and walked down the hallway towards their apartment, the silence persisted. However, it could hardly last.

Not when Lovino was irritated about something.

"Fucking hell, this is some goddamn bullshit." Lovino was grumbling to himself. Antonio closed the door behind them, causing Lovino to look up.

"Hi Lovi, you good?" Antonio asked, noticing his scowling face.

He snorted, "Fucking great."

Feliciano was still looking rather sullen, but decided to ask anyway, "What happened?"

Lovino sighed, "Nothing you need to worry about."

"Well I am worried about it." Feliciano surprised Antonio by crossing his arms.

There was a flash of annoyance on Lovino's face before he seemed to realize that he was supposed to be working on his communication skills, "I'm just having a hell of a time trying to get a job. I met with a lawyer today and he basically told me that I needed to get a job… which I already knew anyway." he said with a huff.

"How did the meeting go?" Antonio asked, hoping to hear a bit of good news.

Lovino's features softened imperceptibly, "Surprisingly well. I meet with him again next week, that's when we're going to file a formal dispute. He's probably gonna want to meet you both."

Antonio nodded, "Of course! I'm glad it went well."

"Me too." Lovino said, some of his previous annoyance fading.

"Does that mean we're going to court soon?" Feliciano asked nervously.

Antonio looked at Lovino expectantly. He looked just as nervous as his brother, "Theoretically, yes. I'm not sure on the specifics, but they're going to send someone to inspect our apartment. They're probably going to interview you too." he looked at Feliciano.

"They are?" he asked in shock.

Lovino nodded, "Well yeah. You're old enough to have a say in all this, although from what I've been told sometimes they don't give a shit either way. You can also testify."

"Oh." Feliciano said, already looking intimidated at the thought of defying his father.

“It’ll be alright. All you have to do is tell the truth.” Antonio tried to console.

“Speaking of which, come here.” Lovino motioned for Feliciano to walk closer.

Feliciano looked at him curiously, “Why?”

“Just come here, I need to see your arm.”

“My arm?”

“Yeah, where that asshole grabbed you. Do you still have a bruise?” Lovino asked.

“I don’t know.” Feliciano pulled up his sleeve, looking for any mark.

Antonio also stepped closer, finding that there was indeed some discoloration leftover. It was faint, but definitely there.

Lovino, for some reason, looked pleased, “Good, we can use this as evidence. Let me take a picture real quick.”

Feliciano was visibly uncomfortable, “Do you have to?”

“I mean it would be for the best if I did. We don’t really have much evidence.” Lovino shrugged.

“This isn’t enough?” Feliciano gestured to the scars that littered his arm, looking angry.

Lovino glared, “I don’t know, I’m just doing what the legal professional told me.”

“Whatever.” Feliciano said, but allowed his brother to document the mark. As soon as he was done he yanked the sleeve down, effectively hiding the marks on his arm, both new and old, “I’m going to do my homework.”

They watched as Feliciano scurried away, stomping his feet a bit childishly as he left. Lovino looked back at Antonio questioningly, “What’s up with him?”

Antonio sighed, “He’s probably just sick of talking about all this.”

“Aren’t we all.” Lovino snorted.

“Yeah, he was asking about how we got together and I may have upset him a bit. We should just give him space.”

“He was asking about us?”

Antonio chuckled nervously, “Well, I may have let it slip that we know about him and Ludwig.”

“Of course you did.” Lovino sighed. “Oh well, at least now I don’t have to pretend to not know how stupidly obvious it was.”

“No kidding.”

Lovino moved to go sit on the couch, Antonio following him as they both plopped down heavily. Antonio leaned against the arm of the couch, Lovino instinctually leaning against Antonio.

“So why did he ask about us?” Lovino asked as he made himself comfortable against the Spaniard.

“He was questioning his feelings for Ludwig, so he wanted to know how we got together.” Antonio laughed lightly, “He was curious about how we could hate each other and like each other at the same time.”

Lovino smirked, “A question I still ask to this day.”

“Me too.” Antonio said, wrapping his arms around his fiery boyfriend.

It was silent for a few seconds before Lovino looked up with furrowed eyebrows, “He really thought we hated each other?”

Antonio shrugged, “I mean we kind of did.”

“I never hated you. You just pissed me off beyond all belief.” Lovino scowled.

Antonio couldn’t hold back the laughter that bubbled up in his chest, “That makes two of us. You couldn’t stand the fact that Feli actually liked me.”

Lovino snorted, “Yeah, well you had no right just showing up being so friendly and shit. Some fucking nerve.”

“Ah, yes. How dare I be friendly to the only kids my age within a twenty mile radius. It’s almost like I was trying to make friends or something ridiculous.”

“Oi, don’t backsass me, bastard!” Lovino sat up slightly, but Antonio didn’t release him.

“What’re you gonna do about it?” he snarked back.

Lovino seemed to be at a loss, not expecting the sass, “You trying to fight?”

“I would never.” Antonio said innocently.

“Pssh. Yeah, right.” Lovino rolled his eyes but settled back down. “You used to be a real piece of work, you know that?”

You’re the one to talk.

“I tried to be nice.” Antonio shrugged.

“Yeah, by butchering my language.” Lovino said, humming in contentment when Antonio started threading his fingers through his hair.

“At least I was trying! I know you would talk too fast for me to understand on purpose. Thank God Feli was there to help.” Antonio said, thinking back to the unpleasant experience with fondness.

Always so difficult.

“And I’m not sorry about it. It’s thanks to me you can understand the language now, even if you still can’t speak it worth shit.” Lovino’s eyes were drooping closed, the fact doing nothing to soften his scathing retort.

“Just like I told Feli, it’s still better than your Spanish.” Antonio said matter-of-factly.

“Fucking good. All the words sound wrong, anyways.” Lovino said, smiling to himself. Antonio doubted he was supposed to see it, but he did anyway.

“Whatever.” Antonio breathed out, realizing that he was going to lose no matter what he said.

He dropped his head onto the back of the couch, also allowing his eyes to fall closed. Lovino had pulled his legs up onto the couch, resting his head comfortably in the crook of Antonio’s arm. Antonio kept threading his fingers through his hair, knowing that he was going to have to get up soon.

“What else did you guys talk about?” Lovino asked softly.

Antonio frowned, “Nothing much. Just trying to sort out some feelings, the normal.”

Lovino laughed softly, “And how did that go?”

“About as well as always. I managed to upset him by bringing up old memories, making myself sad in the process.” Antonio groaned in frustration.

“Are you okay?” Lovino opened his eyes, peering up at Antonio seriously.

He shrugged, “I’ll be fine. Everything’s just a little fucked right now.”

Lovino started at the uncharacteristic swearing, “Are you sure you’re okay, bastard?”

“I’ll be fine, Lovi. I have you guys to keep me sane.” Antonio smiled sincerely.

“I hate to break it to you,” Lovino said as he sat up completely, “but if sanity is what you want, then you need to get as far away from us as possible.”

Antonio just stared at Lovino, trying to figure out just how serious he was being. The staring match didn’t last for long because suddenly Lovino was smiling widely, “What, did I finally break you?” he poked at Antonio’s face.

Antonio swatted his hand away, “If you haven’t already, what makes you think you could now?”

“Is that a challenge?” Lovino quirked one of his eyebrows up.

With a bark of laughter, Antonio replied, “Oh *God* no.”

Lovino crossed his arms with a smirk, “And what does that mean?”

“It means that you’re a little shit. Don’t think I’ve forgotten some of the bullshit you used to pull.” Antonio said, hiding a smile.

The smirk was wiped right off Lovino's face, “You deserved it. And what the fuck is with all the cursing today?”

Antonio snorted, “What, I’m not allowed to curse every once in a while?”

Lovino squirmed, “Well, yeah. It just sounds weird.”

“Well fucking excuse me.” Antonio said cheekily, enjoying how truly uncomfortable Lovino was looking.

“Maybe I did break you…” Lovino grumbled to himself.

Antonio laughed loudly, “Maybe. Now what do you want for dinner?”

Lovino pouted when Antonio stood up, “I don’t care.”

“Of course you don’t.” Antonio sighed. He thought that maybe something simple was in order. Maybe soup or something. Anything that was easily digestible, for Feliciano’s sake.

Antonio was lost in thought, therefore he didn’t notice how Lovino stood behind him. Suddenly there were arms around his waist and Lovino was burying his head in his back.

“Lovi?”

“Shut up.”

“But what are you doing?” Antonio asked, smiling in amusement as Lovino groaned in apparent distress.

“You got up.” he pouted.

“Uh, yes?”

“So sit back down.” Lovino all but demanded.

“Well you’re awfully clingy today.” Antonio said, trying not to laugh.

He didn’t answer for a minute, simply holding onto his waist. Antonio was growing worried when Lovino finally said something, “You said you were sad.”

Oh, he feels bad.

That made more sense to Antonio, given Lovino didn’t often cling to him like this, “I’m alright, seriously.”

Lovino simply huffed, but released him. Antonio turned to face him, noticing the way his cheeks burned red in apparent embarrassment. Without another word Antonio put his hand on top of Lovino's head in a rather patronizing gesture. It immediatly pissed him off, just as intended, "Oi, what the fuck?"

Antonio couldn't help but laugh, slipping his hand to the back of his head before pulling him in for a kiss. Lovino went rigid, eyes blown open in surprise. But he soon realized what was happening and begrudgingly brought a hand up to Antonio's chest, returning the kiss.

They pulled away, Antonio with a smirk and Lovino with a fabricated glare. His face screamed annoyance, but his eyes shone with relief.

"Can we not talk about this anymore now?" Antonio pleaded.

Lovino let out a long-suffering sigh, "I guess."

Antonio smiled brightly, "Good! Now, let's make dinner."

"Fine." Lovino said, rolling his eyes even if his smile betrayed his true feelings.

"We should check on Feli, too." Antonio said, walking into the kitchen .

Lovino nodded, "I will in a little bit. We should give him some alone time."

Antonio hummed in agreement, putting a pot on the stove. They worked around each other, cooking in silence. It was nice, peaceful even. Lovino began humming softly to himself as he stirred the soup that bubbled softly on the stove. Antonio leaned against the counter as he watched. They were the picture of domesticity, and Antonio briefly wished that it could last forever.

With a sigh, Antonio resigned himself to the fact that they might never have the life they want. There were too many barriers, too much drama to think about the future. It was probably best just to focus on the present, but that was getting hard given how the past was creeping in on them.

Don't think about it.

Antonio shook his head, trying to block out the noise. He wasn't sure if it was working or not, so he turned his attention back to Lovino's gentle humming. It helped, and Antonio closed his eyes as he tried to soak in the feeling of the artificial peace, pretending that there wasn't a tomorrow.

Don't think about it.

Antonio pushed on a smile and walked up to where Lovino still pleasantly hummed. They cooked together in silence, working around each other in perfect synchronicity.

Soon they had completed dinner, and it took minimal coaxing to convince Feliciano out of his room. Antonio was pleased to see that he was at least trying to eat his dinner, and was glad that they could at least all sit together in relative peace, however fragile it was.

He couldn’t ignore all his problems forever, but Antonio thought he could stand to pretend everything was alright for at least a little while longer. So that’s what he did, humming in contentment as they ate, trying to ignore the fact that any day this could all come to an end.

Don’t think about it.

So he didn’t for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Oof, hey y'all it's been a while...

Sorry for the impromptu break, but I was really burnt out for a while. I had like no inspiration so I decided to take a break for a while. But now I'm back, and I feel excited to start writing again! I really do apologize for just disappearing for like two weeks (which I understand is not that long, but it's long for me dammit!). But I promise, from the bottom of my heart, that I will not abandon this ever.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! I appreciate all of you so much. This chapter was a wild ride, ngl. Just for the record, I have their entire past like mapped out and stuff. I could probably write a prequel when this one is done (thought? feelings?).

That's all I got for now, hope you liked the chapter!

Love you all, have a good night/day <3

'Till next time :)

Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was finally the end of his shift and Feliciano was fighting a broad smile as he happily pocketed his new paycheck. Now that Lovino didn't have a job, Feliciano felt more responsibility than ever. Even though there was a decent amount of pressure at the thought, he could honestly say that having a job had boosted his confidence and was slowly but surely improving his own perception of self-worth.

Finally losing the battle against that smile, Feliciano all but skipped to the exit. He could feel just a twinge of nervousness, knowing that he was about to talk through some of his doubts with Ludwig in a mere matter of minutes. But his conversation with Antonio, while at the time sent him into despair, fostered in him a flicker of hope. He had been left alone to stew on everything and had come to the conclusion that he had felt insecure for his entire life, so there was only up from here.

Or maybe that was just his optimism speaking.

Whatever the case, if Antonio managed to find happiness despite his own struggles, then Feliciano was confident that he could too.

He finally made it to the exit, finding Ludwig leaning against the wall with his arms crossed. His eyes were closed too, and Feliciano felt his face soften at the serene picture he painted.

He looks so peaceful.

A mischievous smirk overtook his features.

He snuck up to the motionless German, halting just in front of him. Feliciano was rather proud of his stealth as he prepared to force a hopefully dramatic and possibly loud reaction out of the otherwise stoic Ludwig.

However, just as he was about to put his *devious* plan into action, a pair of blue eyes snapped open to meet him.

Feliciano shrieked in surprise as two hands clapped on his shoulders, thoroughly preventing him from jumping a meter in the air.

Ludwig wore a self-satisfied smirk, "Good try."

The hands left his shoulders, Ludwig shoving them into his pockets instead. Feliciano's heart was still beating madly in his chest, "Wha-? How?"

"Next time you try to sneak up on me, don't make so much noise. Honestly, I could hear you from clear across the room." Ludwig said with a shrug.

Feliciano pouted, “I thought I was being quiet.”

Ludwig snorted, “That was quiet?”

He didn’t dignify that with a response, simply hitting him lightly on the arm. Ludwig didn’t react, but that smirk did not budge from his face as he turned to walk out of the building.

Feliciano scrambled to catch up, “Hey, wait!”

Ludwig slowed his steps down, allowing Feliciano to fall in step with him. They made it out onto the street, the sun already long gone. They were truly in the midst of autumn now, leaves scattered haphazardly across the ground, only occasionally disturbed by the chill breeze. The streetlights illuminated the sidewalk as the two walked side by side. It was a crisp night, the moon hanging low as it struggled to climb into the night sky.

“It’s so sad.” Feliciano said suddenly.

Ludwig turned a curious gaze to him, “What is?”

“Everything looks so dead! And the sun sets really early now, too.” Feliciano lamented.

“Just a couple weeks ago you were going on about how much you loved the fall.” Ludwig said in amusement.

“Yeah, but not when everything dies!”

“Isn’t that the point of fall?” Ludwig asked in confusion.

Feliciano furrowed his eyebrows in thought, “I mean, I guess. But now all the leaves are on the ground, so it's not pretty anymore.”

“So, you like the concept of fall in theory,” Ludwig started slowly, “but you don’t like it in real life?”

“Pretty much.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes, “Unbelievable.”

Feliciano laughed, “What?”

“I need to stop trying to make sense of your thought process, it gives me a headache just thinking about it.” he replied with the faintest of smiles.

Once again, Feliciano pouted, “Always so mean to me.” A smile started worming its way onto his face as he recalled something, “I think you’re just jealous.”

“Jealous?” Ludwig asked incredulously.

Feliciano crossed his arms, “Yeah, you’re mad that I got the same grade as you on our last history test.”

Ludwig groaned, “We got the same grade because I sent you the studyguide. You’re welcome, by the way.”

“Hey, I filled out some of it!” Feliciano defended.

“The line where it asks for your name is not a question.” Ludwig snarked.

“I bet you’re just mad because you got that part wrong.” Feliciano shot back.

Ludwig looked at him blankly, “Are you implying that I got *my name* wrong?”

“I might be. Don’t worry about it, you’ll get it next time.” Feliciano patted his shoulder in a patronizing gesture.

“Unbelievable.” Ludwig looked down on him as Feliciano feigned sympathy, “I think you spend too much time around Gilbert.”

With a bark of laughter, Feliciano let his facade of superiority fall, “Maybe I need to be around him more often. You’re much more fun when he gets you all embarrassed.”

Ludwig’s face instantly went red, “Yeah, far too much time around him.”

Feliciano simply laughed as he looped their arms together. The longer he was with Ludwig, the less doubt he really felt. They still needed to talk about everything, and they would, but right now the atmosphere was easy and light. Even as they made their way into the apartment, Feliciano could feel his uneasiness melt away.

What’s there to be worried about? It’s just Ludwig.

Well, Ludwig and his brother.

“Feli! How’re you doing, man?” Gilbert asked brightly as soon as they walked in.

“It’s nice to see you too.” Ludwig said under his breath.

Feliciano laughed, “I’m good. How are you?”

“Better than you, I didn’t have to deal with that killjoy all the way over here.” Gilbert motioned towards his brother with a sad shake of his head.

Ludwig scoffed, but didn’t retaliate as he kicked off his shoes.

“He’s just mad that we got the same grade on a test.” Feliciano laughed, watching Ludwig out of the corner of his eye for a reaction.

So far, nothing. But Gilbert had quite a way with words, “Aww, it’s alright, *bruder!* Maybe Feli can help you out next time.”

“I’m the one who helped-”

“Yeah, I’m sure you’ll get your name right next time.” Feliciano cut him off with a smirk.

Ludwig was getting irritated, “I didn’t get my-”

“You got your name wrong?” Gilbert’s eyes were bright with mischief.

“No, that’s stupid.” Ludwig growled.

“Here, I can help: it’s L-U-D-” Gilbert began.

Ludwig finally had enough, “Knock it off, *dummkopf!”*

Feliciano had a hand over his mouth, desperately trying to suppress his laughter.

Gilbert recoiled, placing a hand over his chest. He looked truly offended, “I will not tolerate that kind of language. Not in my household!”

Ludwig brought a thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

The subsequent burst of laughter from Feliciano couldn’t be muffled. He tried desperately to stay quiet enough to hear Gilbert’s response:

“Who is teaching you this kind of language?” Gilbert said with a convincing look of horror plastered on his face, “Surely not I.”

“Surely. Yeah, whatever.” Ludwig grumbled. “Why does this always happen when you two are together?”

Gilbert finally let the act drop as he walked over to stand next to Feliciano, “Great minds think alike.” He held his hand out for a high-five, and Feliciano returned it.

Ludwig just looked on with a resigned face, “This is my life now, isn’t it?”

“Oh, don’t be so dramatic!” Gilbert laughed.

Feliciano walked up to Ludwig with a sincere smile, “If it really bothers you, we can stop.”

Ludwig gave a small smile in return, “I appreciate it, but nothing you say is ever going to shut that idiot up.”

“You’re damn right!” Gilbert yelled, returning to his seat at the kitchen table.

With a sigh, Ludwig led Feliciano with him into the kitchen, “Have you eaten?”

He shook his head, “Nope.”

“We have some leftover stir fry in the fridge!” Gilbert said loudly.

Though his stomach rolled at the thought, Feliciano put on a smile and said, “That sounds good.”

“Really? I mean, yeah,” Ludwig said in mild surprise, “I’ll get it ready.”

“Thanks!” Feliciano said with a smile, truly meaning it.

As soon as the food was warmed up in a bowl, Feliciano took a seat at the table and dug in. Ludwig watched him curiously the whole time, also taking a seat across from Gilbert.

“So how was school, you two?” Gilbert asked as he gathered some of the papers in front of him.

Ludwig simply shrugged, but Feliciano looked up from his food and said, “It was good! We started a new art project today which was fun and Ludwig and Kiku both sat with me at lunch so I wasn’t alone.”

“Do they not normally sit with you?” Gilbert shot an accusing look at Ludwig.

“They do, I was just in the hallway today. They couldn’t find me last time, so it was kind of my fault.” Feliciano clarified with a nervous laugh.

Gilbert nodded slowly, most likely filing that tidbit of information away for later. However, he chose not to linger on it as he turned to Ludwig, “And how was your day?”

“Fine.” Ludwig offered with a shrug.

“Ugh, you never tell me anything. How do you do it, Feli?” Gilbert groaned.

Feliciano smiled, “I don’t know, I’ve never had a problem.”

“You must have the patience of a saint. Lord knows I don’t.” Gilbert said with an amused huff.

“Well, Ludwig’s easy to be around…" A peaceful feeling overtook him as Feliciano drifted away in thought, "Honestly he’s just so sweet and nice, and-” he cut himself off abruptly before he could go on, his face turning a light shade of red.

Oops, didn’t mean to say that last part out loud.

Ludwig’s face was also going an interesting shade of red as he froze with wide eyes. He looked down as he fidgeted with his hands, unable to form a coherent response.

“Aww, that’s so cute! Lud, you better not let him go. Ever.” Gilbert gushed.

“I don’t plan on it.” Ludwig said under his breath.

Feliciano doubted anyone was supposed to hear that, but he did anyway. He couldn’t fight the smile on his face as he scooped up another mouthful of food.

He was able to finish just over half of the bowl, and Feliciano was honestly very proud of that accomplishment. He helped clean up, putting his dishes in the sink.

“So what are you guys doing tonight?” Gilbert asked, shooing Feliciano out of the way to finish the dishes.

Good question.

Feliciano had come over with the intention to talk about things. But now he was feeling that desire wane. After all, Ludwig clearly cared about him. Feliciano was hard-pressed to find any evidence on the contrary after tonight, and he felt a little foolish for questioning his own feelings.

Ludwig shrugged, “Maybe watch a movie or something.” he looked at Feliciano, like he was asking for permission.

“Yeah, that sounds good!” he responded brightly.

“Cool, what are you going to watch?” Gilbert asked as he finished the dishes.

“I don’t know. We could always grab my laptop and see what’s online.” Ludwig offered.

Feliciano nodded, “Sure, I can grab your laptop if you want to make popcorn or something?”

Ludwig nodded in agreement, “It’s on my desk.”

“Got it!” Feliciano chirped as he turned to head to Ludwig’s room. Once again he laughed at how bare the bedroom was. Everything had a place, the laptop being no exception.

Feliciano grabbed the laptop, not noticing the notebook that sat just underneath. As he pulled the computer towards him, the notebook slid forward as well before careening towards the ground.

“Oops.” Feliciano said, putting the laptop back down as he went to retrieve the fallen notebook.

He reached down, noticing how it had landed face up. He had every intention of simply closing it and placing it back in its designated spot, but something caught his eye.

It was his name.

What?

Now unable to quell his curiosity, Feliciano took a closer look at the notebook. The page he was currently looking at mentioned his name a few different times as well as some speculations regarding his scarring and mental health.

How long has he been watching me like this?

There were even guesses about how he got his scars, and a surprising amount of observations about his eating habits. It denoted various theories regarding his mental health, including potential reasons for his actions including financial instability, undiagnosed anxiety, and personality disorders.

Feliciano’s face twisted in hurt, wondering if he was just some experiment to Ludwig.

While Feliciano was frozen flipping through the notes on him, Ludwig must have gotten worried at how long he was taking.

“Hey, what’s taking so… long.” Ludwig froze when he saw Feliciano flipping through the notebook.

“Ludwig?” Feliciano asked, eyes glued to the page.

Ludwig audibly gulped, “Y-yeah?”

He brought his eyes up slowly, “What’s this?”

He peered at what Feliciano was reading, cringing away as he said, “Nothing. I was just trying to figure something out.” Ludwig tried to shrug it off, looking far too nonchalant for Feliciano’s liking.

Suddenly, Feliciano was angry, “Nothing? What were you trying to figure out?” he asked, even though it was more than obvious given the contents of the notebook.

Ludwig sighed, dragging a hand down his face, “I was just worried.”

“So you didn’t think to ask me?” Feliciano put the notebook down in favor of crossing his arms.

“I tried!” Ludwig said defensively, “You wouldn’t tell me anything, so I decided to figure out what was wrong for myself.”

If that wasn’t the weakest response Feliciano had ever heard.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe — just maybe — I didn’t say anything because I didn’t want anyone to know?” Feliciano’s voice was rising in volume as the scowl on his face deepened.

“I just wanted to figure out what was wrong.” Ludwig had enough tact to look guilty, but that did nothing to appease the hurt Feliciano was feeling.

“You wanted to figure it out? Really?” Feliciano could feel betrayal sneak into his heart, remembering why he had been questioning his feelings in the first place.

I knew he didn’t actually like me. I’m just an experiment to him.

Ludwig shrugged, “Well yeah. You wouldn’t tell me what was wrong.”

His excuses were getting repetitive and Feliciano was about to lose it, “What, am I just some puzzle to you? You want to figure out what’s wrong with me like some twisted game or something?”

“What? No, of course not!” Ludwig said, taking a step forward as he tried to relay his sincerity.

Unfortunately, the words just weren't cutting through Feliciano's rage at the moment, "Then what is it? Because you wanted to figure me out? As soon as you find out what makes me tick are you just going to leave me?"

Do I even matter to you?

Ludwig clearly didn't know how to respond, struggling to get any words out. Feliciano simply stood, absolutely fuming as tears of frustration and hurt began to run down his face, "Why does this always happen to me? There's always gotta be *something* going on behind my back. Why doesn't anybody just talk to me?!" he all but begged.

"I told you, I tried to." Ludwig said, the beginnings of annoyance starting to cross his expression.

Feliciano didn't miss it, "Oh, so now it's my fault. You're not entitled to know my past just because you want to know what happened. My life isn't on display, it's private!"

Ludwig shook his head, "I never said any of that, you're not listening to me."

"I'm done listening to you, if you haven't noticed. Actually, I'm just done." Feliciano said with a glare, turning on his heel to storm out of the room.

"Where are you going?" Ludwig asked as he stood in shock.

"Home!" Feliciano called over his shoulder, already marching down the hallway.

How could he? I thought I could trust him…

"Wait, let me explain! Let's just calm down and talk about this." Ludwig called, following him down the hallway.

"Calm down?" Feliciano scoffed, turning to face Ludwig. "You used me like some experiment, trying to diagnose me like I'm crazy. Well, I'm not!" The glare on his face could rival Lovino's, the intensity causing Ludwig to take a step back.

The hurt Feliciano was feeling ran deep, tugging at his heart. He had trusted Ludwig, opened up to him in ways he never had before. But it seemed that those feelings weren't reciprocated. Ludwig just wanted to figure him out, like some puzzle to be manipulated.

"I didn't use you. Please, let's just talk this out." Ludwig tried, loosening his strict hairstyle by running a hand through the blond locks.

How do I believe you?

Feliciano didn't trust himself to speak, so he just put his head down and kept marching down the hallway.

A small part of him wanted to believe Ludwig, to stop and try to talk things through. But try as he might, Feliciano couldn't get himself to turn around and face the blond. It hurt too much knowing that everyone ended up betraying him in the end. Maybe he just wasn't meant

to trust anyone. It's not like it's ever worked out in the past — even his own brother had betrayed his trust at one point.

With that thought in mind, Feliciano emerged with an angry huff into the kitchen. Gilbert was there, phone gripped in hand with a look of horror on his face. But Feliciano didn't register that Gilbert was approximately thirty seconds from having a full-scale meltdown over something, he was just too focused on pulling on his shoes and running all the way home.

Gilbert must have noticed Feliciano there with him in the kitchen because he jerked up in surprise, "Where are you going?"

"I'm going home." Feliciano huffed, spotting Ludwig approaching from the corner of his eye.

Gilbert shook his head, his breathing coming out in quick puffs like he had just run a marathon, "No, no, no. You can't. Just stay here for a while, *ja?"*

"No, I'm leaving!" Feliciano shouted.

Feliciano reached for the door, already pulling it open. However, he couldn't open it more than a couple inches before it slammed closed with a *bang.*

He looked up to find Gilbert hovering over him, hand still on the door.

"Wha-?"

"You *can't* go home." Gilbert said, eyes wide with despair.

Feliciano could feel dread in his stomach at the look, noticing for the first time how pale Gilbert was. His eyes were watery, and the way he held his phone in a white-kncuckled grip did not bode well with Feliciano as some of his anger was forgotten.

"Gil?"

Slowly Gilbert brought the phone away from his ear, ending the call. He shoved it in his pocket as he looked back up at Feliciano, "It's your brother."

There was a cold pit in Feliciano's stomach at the words, "My brother?"

Gilbert nodded in resignation, "He's been arrested. They're looking for you."

Chapter End Notes

:)

Sorry, not sorry. I love you all, I promise <3

Hope you liked it, let me know what you think of my little twist there. Thanks so much for reading, you guys make me so freaking happy like for real.

Peace out, sorry to make you agonize over this!

'Till next time!

Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been an ordinary night — Antonio lazily lounging on the couch humming along to a ranting Lovino as he paced. He was going on about his difficulties finding a job, cursing anybody and everybody for his current state of unemployment. Antonio, being used to these long (and sometimes nonsensical) rants, simply nodded to every point Lovino made.

The atmosphere was light, even if Lovino was (loudly) complaining about anything that came to mind. It was comfortable. Normal.

So of course it couldn't last.

"They never even called me back, even though they were just *desperate* for workers. What a load of horseshit!" Lovino threw his hands up as he stomped around the living room.

"Mmm-hmm." Antonio hummed, not really listening.

"And then-" Lovino was cut off by a sharp rap on the door.

Antonio looked up, "Who could that be?"

Lovino shrugged, visibly irritated at being interrupted, "I don't know, but they better have a damn good explanation." He walked over to the door, cracking it open. Antonio was left peering over the back of the couch, listening for a clue as to who it could be.

"I'm sorry, what?" Lovino asked, still not opening the door fully.

The tone Lovino had used was worrying, so Antonio decided to investigate. As he stood to join Lovino at the doorway, he heard a snippet of the conversation drift through:

"Are you Lovino Valenti?"

"That's Lovino Vargas to you." Lovino crossed his arms.

The voice on the other end cleared their throat, "Can you please open the door?"

Antonio made his way completely over, peering over Lovino's shoulder. He was shocked when he was met with the steady gaze of not one, but two police officers.

With a grumble, Lovino opened the door all the way, "What's this all about, then?"

One of the officers presented Lovino with a document, "We have a warrant for your arrest."

"What? Why?' Lovino's eyes blew open in shock.

Antonio was shocked too. While he had known it was a possibility that this would happen, he never thought that it would actually come to be. With bated breath, Antonio tuned back in to the conversation transpiring in front of him:

“You’re being arrested on charges of forgery and fraud as well as suspected neglect of a minor.”

What?

“What do you mean?” Lovino asked in bewilderment.

The officers didn’t answer, simply motioning for Lovino to turn around. He acquiesced silently, for once not putting up a fight.

“We understand you have a brother, and we’ve been instructed to return him to his legal guardian.”

“Like hell you will!” Lovino said loudly, though he made the wise decision not to physically struggle.

“Lovi?” Antonio asked, frozen to the spot.

“Remember what we talked about.” Lovino said with a glare even as he was being handcuffed.

“What are you-”

Antonio was cut-off when one of the officers started reading Lovino his rights. That was the moment that Antonio realized that this was really happening.

No. Nononono. This can’t be happening.

“Now, can you please tell us your brother’s whereabouts?” one of the officers asked calmly.

Lovino shook his head, “I don’t know.”

One of the officer’s eyebrows quirked up, “He’s not here?”

“He’s a teenager. What, am I supposed to know where he is at all times?” Lovino spat, playing dumb.

Of course, Lovino knew exactly where his brother was. So did Antonio, but it was obvious that Lovino was trying to buy time for him.

The two officers whispered back and forth. Antonio thought he could hear one of them say something about staking out in front of their apartment to await Feliciano’s return home.

Shit, they’re going to take him.

Antonio was beginning to hyperventilate as he realized how quickly everything was falling apart around him. He gripped at his chest as he desperately tried to steady his breathing.

“Oi, calm down!” Lovino called loudly. The officers, to their great credit, let him speak.

Antonio shook his head, “But-”

“But nothing! You need to keep your head right now. I’ll be fine, you hear me?” Lovino growled.

“What do I do?” Antonio breathed out quietly.

Lovino was being nudged gently towards the doorway, “What we talked about, bastard. There’ll be time to fight, okay?”

Antonio cursed his inability to act at the moment, having to settle with words that were hardly convincing to even his own ears, “Okay. We’re going to figure this out.”

With a final nod, Lovino was led out the door. One of the officers nodded once to Antonio before he closed the door behind him.

And then there was silence.

Everything had happened so quickly, Antonio could hardly believe it was real. Unlike the movies, the arrest was made with very little fuss. What was more surprising was how well Lovino had taken it despite his usual temperament.

He was probably waiting for this to happen.

The realization hit Antonio hard, and in the next moment he was crouching down as he gripped his chest.

Of course Lovi was expecting this.

Antonio gasped for breath as he knelt on the floor. He could feel tears start to gather at his eyes, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. He was at a total loss as to what to do next, and he was quickly falling into despair.

“Remember what we talked about.” Lovino had said.

Antonio’s eyes snapped up as he recalled the words.

What we talked about…

Lovino had told him, demanded even, that he take Feliciano and run as far as possible if something like this were to happen.

“But I can’t.” Antonio said aloud in the empty apartment.

He couldn't just abandon Lovino, not when he was facing ludicrous charges like *neglect* of all things.

Tears were now falling freely around Antonio's face, and he let them. What else was he supposed to do? He was still kneeling on the floor and it was all he could do to pull himself upwards to a standing position.

"Oh God, what do I do?" Antonio called despondently. He wasn't sure if the echo he heard was completely imagined or not.

He stumbled blindly to the back of the couch, groaning as he leaned his weight against it. Every second he was getting closer to a full-scale meltdown.

I'm sorry Lovi, I can't leave.

Antonio felt like he was betraying Lovino by not doing as instructed. But how was he expected to just up and leave in the middle of all this drama? They didn't even own a car, just how was Antonio expected to run?

Finally succumbing to those tears, Antonio buried his face in his hands. He couldn't even pull himself fully onto the couch before he collapsed, trying to muffle his hopeless crying.

He could have sat there for hours, gripping the edge of the couch as he tried to swallow his pathetic crying. It certainly felt like an eternity, but in reality Antonio was probably only there for a half hour. With a start he realized that they were going to be looking for Feliciano.

Shit, I need to warn him!

Antonio reached for his phone, but froze.

I'm probably being watched too.

Maybe he was being paranoid, but Antonio had seen enough dramas on the television to have a decent idea as to what was going on. Since the officers didn't search the apartment after Lovino refused to share his brother's whereabouts, it was doubtful that they had a search warrant. That didn't mean they couldn't come back with one, but they were most definitely going to be monitoring the activity around the apartment very carefully.

So Antonio was hesitant to call Feliciano in fears that he might tip off the police to where he was, even if he knew logically that they probably didn't have access to his phone.

But what if…

Antonio was brought out of his paranoid train of thought by another knock on the door.

"Not again." he said to himself, trying to wipe the tears off his face.

He made his way to the door warily. It was doubtful it was the police again, but he couldn't rule it out. He cracked it open slowly and instantly wished that it *was* the cops

"Ciao!" came the bright greeting from none other than Cristiano Valenti.

Antonio instantly tried to slam the door shut, but Cristiano stuck his foot in the way, "Woah, hold on there! I just have a question for you."

"And I don't want to hear it!" Antonio yelled, voice still scratchy from his earlier crying.

Cristiano was bigger than Antonio, in both height and weight. Therefore, it didn't take much effort for him to push the door open, "Why so hostile? Let's just talk this out." he smiled with his unnaturally white teeth. His greasy hair was slicked back, and Antonio almost gagged at the ridiculous amount of cologne he was no doubt wearing.

Antonio jumped back when he realized that he couldn't shut him out, "There's cops all over here, all I have to do is yell and they'll come get you!" he bluffed, hoping there was some truth to those words.

Cristiano leaned against the doorframe nonchalantly, smirking as he said, "Nah, there's just a car out front. Good try though."

Why is he here now of all times? Antonio thought desperately.

Outloud, however, he tried to mask his despair with hostility, "What the hell do you want?"

Cristiano seemed to think about it, "I'm just trying to make your life easier. This can all stop if you just answer me one thing."

Antonio didn't trust the smile that man plastered on for an instance, "And what's that?"

"Where's my son?" he asked lightly, though there was some annoyance still in his eyes.

Antonio scoffed, "Thanks to you, he's in jail. So you can fuck right off."

"No, not that one." Cristiano waved his hand in the air impatiently, "The younger one, where is he?"

"I don't know. And if I did, why would I tell you?" Antonio glared.

Cristiano sighed, "Pretty irresponsible, not knowing where he is. Aren't you supposed to be looking after him?"

"Like you're one to talk. You don't give a fuck about his well-being, and it makes me sick that you pretend to care." Antonio spat, fists clenched at his sides as he struggled not to lash out physically.

With a shrug Cristiano responded, "You can think whatever you want, I don't care. How about you just sit tight and stay out of this, alright?"

"Like hell I will!" Antonio roared as he took a step closer.

Cristiano shrugged, completely unfazed by the outburst of anger, “Whatever. I’m taking my son back whether you like it or not. It’s my right after all.” He said with an infuriating amount of smugness. After another beat, he asked, “He doesn’t have many friends, does he?”

Antonio was irritated that Cristiano could act so cool, “What does it matter?”

“Well I seem to remember a German-sounding annoyance at the bar with Lovino, and he was there again to pick up Feliciano on the same night.” Cristiano smiled evilly. “How many Germans do you think live around here?”

The implication that Cristiano had been watching the two brothers that carefully disturbed Antonio. It shouldn’t have been so surprising that he had obviously been stalking them. But the fact that he paid such careful attention, like he was laying in wait for the correct moment to spring into action, was deeply unsettling.

Cristiano’s smile only widened when Antonio didn’t respond, “Just remember, I tried to help you out here.” He turned and began walking away, not looking back when he raised his hand up to wave goodbye, “It was good talking to you, *ciao.”*

Antonio was left to stand in stunned silence, unable to comprehend what he had just been told.

He’s going to get Feli.

That thought launched him into action, dialling up Feliciano’s number in a desperate hope that he hadn’t left just yet. All that previous paranoia at being watched was thrown right out the window as he closed the door, leaning heavily against it.

“C’mon, pick up.” Antonio muttered, tapping his foot rapidly on the ground as he waited for an answer.

After a tense wait, he was sent to voicemail. Antonio nearly threw his phone in frustration, thinking about what to do next.

Suddenly, he remembered he had saved Gilbert’s number, and he instantly began fumbling with his phone in an attempt to pull up his contact.

“Dammit!” he hissed as his shaking hands hindered his attempts to make the call. At long last he hit the call button, bringing the phone up to his ear as he began chewing nervously at his nails.

“Hey, what’s up?” chirped a carefree voice.

“Is Feliciano still there?” Antonio gasped out.

“Um, yes?” Gilbert said, the unasked question obvious in his voice.

Antonio instantly slumped in relief against the door, “Whatever you do, don’t let him leave.”

The beginnings of apprehension were beginning to crawl into Gilbert's voice as he asked, "Why not?"

A headache was forming behind Antonio's eyes as the events of the night started registering in his brain, "It's Lovi," he brought a hand up to rub at his eyes, "he's been arrested."

"You're shitting me." Gilbert deadpanned.

Antonio just groaned in response, wishing that this was all some twisted joke.

"Fuck, alright. What'd they arrest him for?" Gilbert asked with a sigh.

Antonio kept swiping at his eyes, but it did little to hold back the tears forming there, "Forgery, fraud, and… and neglect."

Gilbert was silent for approximately two seconds before he exploded, *"What!?"*

"Yeah." Antonio sniffed hollowly.

"How in the fuck… you know what? We'll figure it out later. What do you need? Are you alright?" Gilbert asked, sounding out of breath.

"Just don't let Feli leave. They're out looking for him." Antonio breathed out, feeling hopelessness hollow out his chest.

Gilbert sucked in a breath, "Don't tell me-"

"They're letting his father take him back." Antonio finished sullenly for him.

"Fuck."

Antonio nodded in agreement as his breath began hitching in his throat, "I don't know what to do anymore."

"Shit, dude. Does anyone know he's here?" Gilbert asked, clearly at a loss.

"How many Germans do you think live around here?"

Antonio groaned as he remembered those words, "I-I think his father does. I think he's been stalking us."

"Oh God, are you fucking joking?" Gilbert said with a groan.

Antonio shook his head, "I don't know if he knows where you live, but he mentioned you."

"Woah, woah. Wait. Did he talk to you?"

"Yeah, just now. He was looking for Feli." Antonio said, sinking down against the door until he was sitting on the ground.

"Motherfucker. He can't just fucking do that! That arrogant son of a bitch." Gilbert growled.

“What do we do?” Antonio asked.

Gilbert was silent, his breathing the only sound coming over the speaker. After a few agonizing seconds of silence, he spoke, “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but there’s nothing we can do.”

In his heart, Antonio knew that was going to be the answer, “No, you can’t say that.”

“What do you want from me?” Gilbert asked desperately. “I can promise to keep him here for now, but he can’t stay here forever! And what if the cops show up? I’m sorry, but I have a brother too. I can’t help anyone if I’m arrested too.”

“I know, but…”

But what? There was nothing else. Antonio knew they had lost, Gilbert was absolutely right. Right now it was only a matter of time before Feliciano was damned back to his father.

“Listen,” Gilbert said in a much calmer tone, “Lovino already started filing a case against their father. I can *maybe* pull some strings and get Tino to file the dispute. If that happens, then he can’t leave until the case is settled.”

Antonio nodded, “Please, just do anything.”

“I can’t promise anything here.” Gilbert warned. “It all depends on if these charges against Lovino hold up or not. My guess is that they’ll drop, or he’ll get away with a fine. Their father probably did this to keep Lovino tied up while he slipped away, but I doubt he knows that Lovino already had a dispute ready to be filed.”

“Really?” Antonio asked hopefully.

Gilbert sighed heavily, “Maybe, I’ve seen this kind of bullshit happen before. But you realize that we’re probably going to lose Feli until the case gets underway, right?”

And just like that, Antonio’s heart dropped in his chest.

“Is there anything we can do?” he asked as his breathing picked up.

Lose him? After everything, we’re still going to lose him?

“Shit dude, what do you want me to say?” Gilbert sounded close to tears. “I’ve done everything I can, but if the court placed him back in his father’s care then there is fuck-all we can do about it!”

Antonio’s breath hitched as he said, “So all I can do is sit and wait for him to be taken back? After all the things he put them through?”

With a groan, Gilbert responded with a defeated tone, “I’m sorry, man.”

Antonio looked down at the floor, unwilling to believe it. He could hear his own heartbeat as his head began to throb. With a pang he realized that he was truly and utterly alone. He

looked around the apartment, for the first time realizing just how empty it was.

“You still with me?” Gilbert asked nervously.

Without a word, Antonio brought the phone away from his ear. After a few seconds he could hear Gilbert speaking to someone new, presumably whoever he was with. But Antonio couldn’t be bothered to register the words. He simply stared ahead as he ended the call.

Now left alone for the second time that night, Antonio fought the wave of hopelessness that threatened to drown him completely.

No, I can’t give up yet.

But there was nothing he could do. Even if they still had a chance in the future, it didn’t change the fact that Feliciano was going to go back to his father.

I’m so sorry, Lovi. I’m a failure.

Antonio brought his knees up to his chest, flopping onto his side on the floor. Tears still stung at the back of his eyes, but none fell. He wanted to march his way over to Gilbert’s apartment and take Feliciano far away, just as Lovino had said. But he was being watched, and realistically he knew that if he went there now he would only lead Cristiano directly to the prize he sought. He was well and truly stuck, unable to even say goodbye.

Actually, that wasn’t entirely true.

He reached a hand out blindly for his phone, finding it near his knee. He unlocked it, never budging from his curled-up position on the ground. He shot out a text to Feliciano, asking him to call him whenever he saw the text. He made sure the ringer was turned all the way up before putting the phone close to his head.

With one more helpless sigh, Antonio put his head down on the dirty tile below him. His body felt heavy, and he doubted he would be able to drag himself up and onto a more acceptable place to sleep. So he didn’t even try, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to block out the pain in his heart.

It didn’t work.

Antonio gripped at his chest, the loneliness already starting to sink in. He hated waiting, and the helplessness he was feeling only further pulled at his heart, threatening to break it in two.

“I’m sorry.” he whispered.

What he was sorry for was left open-ended. He kept his eyes squeezed shut as a few tears leaked out, and if he stayed there alone for the rest of the night, then nobody would ever know.

Chapter End Notes

Nobody:

Me: Here's some more suffering!

Lol sorry. Thank y'all so much for reading! Shit's gone wild, whatever will our boys do now that they've all been separated? Poor Gil, he tried his best but things just keep getting worse.

Again, please give me a little creative freedom with the law. I researched and shit, but things are so confusing. Everything is accurate to the best of my ability. The only good thing about this area of the law is that it is so vague, a lot of cases like these are left to the interpretation and judgement of the court... also would like to point out that tv dramas are not the best place to get your info from (like Antonio did lol)

Anyways, I'm curious as to whose point of view ya'll would like to see next. I have a couple different directions I can take this, but what would y'all think is the most interesting?

Love you all, bless up and peace out.

'Till next time!

Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ludwig messed up, and he knew it.

The moment he saw Feliciano flipping through that stupid notebook, he knew that he was caught. The reaction was just as explosive as he had imagined it would be, and Ludwig knew he deserved every bit of the angry reaction.

After the quick one-sided shouting match, Feliciano had stormed out into the hallway. Ludwig was trying to stay calm, but Feliciano held no such reservations.

Maybe I should just let him cool off.

With a sigh, he kept chasing Feliciano into the kitchen. He didn't expect his words to get through, but he could at least try.

Ludwig emerged into the kitchen shortly after Feliciano, stopping himself short when Gilbert stepped in:

"Where are you going?" he asked, phone still pressed to his ear.

Ludwig made his way fully into the kitchen, turning a confused eye to his brother and the downright desperate look on his face.

Feliciano must have missed the expression, too lost in his rage, "I'm going home."

"No, no, no. You can't. Just stay here for a while, *ja?"* Gilbert said breathlessly.

"No, I'm leaving!" Feliciano shouted.

Ludwig watched in astonishment as Gilbert slammed the door closed just as Feliciano opened it. It was uncharacteristic for the albino to act so aggressively, and Ludwig could feel something akin to fear settle heavily in his chest.

"Wha-?"

"You *can't* go home." Gilbert said.

"Gil?" Feliciano's anger seemed to have dissipated completely, a fact that only made Ludwig more nervous.

Gilbert shoved his phone into his pocket as he looked back up at Feliciano, "It's your brother."

His brother?

“My brother?” Feliciano unwittingly echoed Ludwig’s thoughts.

Gilbert nodded in resignation, “He’s been arrested. They’re looking for you.”

What?

Ludwig didn’t know what that meant. Of course, his brother being arrested was pretty self-explanatory, but who would be looking for Feliciano?

“No…” Feliciano whispered

Gilbert shook his head, “I’m so sorry. I can’t let you go home right now.”

Ludwig opened his mouth to ask what was happening, but snapped it closed as he watched the scene play out in front of him:

“But that means… that-” Feliciano choked on his words.

Gilbert simply nodded, eyes tearing up, “Yeah.”

“O-okay.” Feliciano said listlessly.

What happened?!

Ludwig was frustrated. Something significant had obviously happened — has been happening — but both Feliciano and Gilbert had kept him completely in the dark. He desperately wanted to help, but he had been denied at every point. That’s why he had taken things into his own hands before realizing that he had dug too deep.

Gilbert wrapped Feliciano in a quick hug before pulling away, “I need to go make a call. Let me know if you need anything.”

Feliciano simply nodded, eyes staring straight ahead as he grappled with the implications of the information just delivered to him.

Gilbert shook his head as he walked back into the kitchen. As he passed Ludwig, he clapped a hand heavily on his shoulder as he whispered, “Keep an eye on him.”

Ludwig nodded, feeling the hand on his shoulder fall away. Although he knew absolutely nothing about the situation, he knew that he could at least try and be a source of comfort for the obviously shell-shocked Italian.

He walked up to Feliciano nervously, gesturing towards the couch. Feliciano simply nodded apathetically as he walked in a daze towards the indicated direction. It was unnerving to see his mood perform a complete 180, and Ludwig could only stare as Feliciano sat heavily on the couch without a hint of emotion.

Whatever happened must have been bad.

With a sigh, Ludwig sat next to the unresponsive Feliciano. He supposed they had a tentative truce brought about by circumstances that were still unknown to Ludwig. Gilbert was speaking in a hushed voice to someone on the phone as he paced aggressively in the kitchen.

The silence was getting awkward, and Ludwig distantly wished for Feliciano to start yelling at him again. Anything was better than this oppressive silence. Besides, he supposed that he deserved to be chewed out by Feliciano for his admittedly selfish actions.

"I-I…"

Ludwig whipped his head to the side when he heard Feliciano begin to stutter. His eyes were watery, but thankfully still very much present. Ludwig still hadn't forgotten the one day he had walked out of school, eyes completely devoid of life.

"I just-" Feliciano breathed in deeply, trying to steady his shaky voice, "I just want it all to stop."

Well that wasn't what Ludwig was expecting, "What do you mean?"

Feliciano shook his head, "Everything. It's too much."

Ludwig put his head in his hands. Feliciano had lamented that there was always something going on behind his back, and Ludwig could honestly empathize. He felt very much the same way at the moment, but he felt he lost the right to ask about anything.

Stupid notebook. Why do I have to be so nosey?

Ludwig couldn't stand to be kept in the dark, hence why he was willing to dig up sensitive information himself. But it seemed that he had royally screwed up this time around, and he wasn't sure how to claw his way out of the hole he had dug. He supposed he could start by apologizing, although every attempt thus far was only met by contempt.

Couldn't hurt to try.

They were still sitting awkwardly on the couch together. There were a few feet separating them, the gap feeling insurmountable. Ludwig sat up from his slumped position and turned his body to Feliciano, "Uh, I know I messed up and you don't even have to listen to me… but, well… um-"

Why is this so hard?

Feliciano had set his listless gaze on him, and Ludwig could honestly say he preferred the glare from earlier. Blatant anger he could read, but Ludwig was horrendous at interpreting other people's emotions.

He sighed, continuing his choppy apology, "But I really am sorry. I wasn't… *using* you." Ludwig dragged a hand down his face as he avoided Feliciano's gaze, "Nobody would tell me what was going on, and I just wanted to help."

Ludwig fidgeted with his hands as he continued to look away. He realized how weak that apology was, but he wasn't exactly a man of many words. He was a bit of a loner by nature, but Feliciano had forced his way into his life. It was such a natural transition that Ludwig was having a hard time remembering what his life was like before the bubbly Italian. He began to crave his company, if only for a break in his self-induced monotony. He knew he was shit at expressing himself, and that his neutral countenance probably came across as apathy, but he really did care.

Shifting awkwardly where he sat, Ludwig shook his head as he tried to clear his thoughts, "I'm sorry, I can go if you want."

But before he could move to get up, Ludwig was shocked to feel a trembling hand land delicately on his shoulder. He looked up in shock, meeting two pained amber eyes, "No, please don't."

Ludwig froze, not daring to move as Feliciano scooted closer. In a motion that was wonderfully familiar, Feliciano had placed himself at Ludwig's side as he dropped his head to rest on his shoulder.

Feliciano sighed in apparent relief as Ludwig willed his body to relax. He hadn't expected for his apology to have been accepted so soon, and Ludwig was just a little confused at the mixed signals he was receiving.

I thought he would still be mad.

Just moments ago, Feliciano was consumed by explosive rage. But now it was as if none of that had happened. Although Ludwig felt some relief, he was still curious as to what had brought about this drastic change of heart.

"Uh, not that I'm complaining, but aren't you still mad?" Ludwig asked in concern.

Then, in an action that completely baffled him, Feliciano began laughing, "I just realized something."

Did I break him?

Ludwig could not fathom what was so funny at the moment, "What?"

The laughter was growing watery, and Ludwig realized that it was quickly devolving into a hiccuping cry, "I said the same thing to Lovi after I eavesdropped on him."

Feliciano's head was still leaning against Ludwig's shoulder. He awkwardly moved an arm to wrap it around the little Italian, still unsure if he was allowed to do that anymore. Now crying in earnest, Feliciano continued, "Nobody would tell me what was going on either, so I found out for myself."

Ludwig gripped him to his side, not having a response to that. Feliciano kept on babbling:

"I acted *just* like Lovi, too. Oh *Dio* I got so angry." he said, agitation coloring his every word.

“You were right to be angry. I shouldn’t have been so nosey.” Ludwig said, afraid of the rabbit hole of self-condemnation Feliciano was going down.

“No, it’s all my fault! I *blamed* you for a situation I created.” he said with a scoff, his tone just dripping in self-degradation.

And just as Ludwig had feared, Feliciano was willing to pin the entirety of the blame on himself, “Stop, this wasn’t your fault. Like you said earlier, I’m not entitled to know anything about you.”

“But I should have explained everything! I made you worried, and-”

“And nothing!” Ludwig cut him off. “Yes, I was worried. I’m still worried, but you don’t owe me anything.”

“I’m sorry.” he said meekly, deciding to shut down before he could go on.

With a sigh, Ludwig just held him. He still felt guilty, and the feeling was only exacerbated by the fact that Feliciano didn’t seem to blame him at all.

I still don’t know what’s happening…

Ludwig looked up and spotted where Gilbert was still pacing restlessly in the kitchen. Their eyes met for a fleeting moment, and Ludwig briefly wondered just how large his brother’s role was in this situation. Gilbert gave an imperceptible nod before he put his head down and disappeared down the hallway, presumably closing himself off in his room.

Ludwig brought his eyes back down, trying to figure out the best way to get through to Feliciano. But it turned out that he didn’t need to do anything, because suddenly Feliciano was pulling away, “I want to explain everything.”

“You don’t have-”

“No!” Feliciano cut him off, a hint of steel entering his voice, “I’m not going to keep secrets anymore. It always hurts in the end.”

Ludwig nodded but felt he needed to say something first, “Okay, but only if you want to. I will not allow you to blame yourself for my actions.”

“But-”

“No, stop that. Now.” Ludwig said with a well-meaning glare.

Feliciano sighed heavily, but there was a small smile on his face as he said, “Yes, sir.”

Ludwig snorted at the response, “I mean it.”

“I know.” Feliciano responded, turning his gaze to the ground. “I don’t know if I’ll have a chance to tell you any of this after tonight.”

Ludwig's eyes blew wide open at that response, "What are you talking about?"

"My brother… oh God, Lovi-" Feliciano brought in a shuddering breath as he truly processed what had happened, "He said this might happen, but I never thought…"

Ludwig still had an arm loosely looped around Feliciano's shoulders, and he decided to tighten the hold as he struggled with himself.

"He was arrested tonight, apparently." Feliciano said, closing his eyes. "With Lovi gone, that means I'm going back to *him."*

"Wait, where are you going? Back where?" Ludwig asked in confusion.

"My father. He's been trying to get me back for a while now." Feliciano shuddered, his breathing beginning to pick up rapidly.

Ludwig didn't know exactly what that implied, but Feliciano's reaction was a good indication that this was not an ideal situation, "And that's a bad thing, right?"

His breathing wasn't slowing down, and a panicked edge began to color Feliciano's voice, "Very bad."

Shit, is this what a panic attack looks like?

Ludwig had never witnessed one firsthand, but he imagined that this was how they started.

Feliciano was obviously trying to wrestle his panic into submission, and he was apparently succeeding because he was able to get out, "I may have mentioned it at some point, but he's not exactly a nice man to be around."

Ludwig nodded, indeed remembering when Feliciano had mentioned that.

All those scars too…

Feliciano must have noticed the way Ludwig's eyes shifted to his arms because he was suddenly lifting up one of his sleeves, "You were right about these being from a cigarette. In the notebook, that is."

Ludwig audibly gulped as he openly stared at the back of Feliciano's arm. He had already known what was there, but it didn't make seeing countless clusters of circular scars marring his skin any easier to witness. They were even more grotesque up close, and Ludwig could feel a wave of horror crash into him when he connected the dots.

His father did that… and he's going back… to him…

Ludwig rounded on Feliciano, gripping both of his shoulders as he stared imploringly into his eyes, "You are *not* going back."

A few tears leaked out of his eyes as Feliciano turned his head away, "I-I don't… I can't…"

His breathing was picking up again, and Ludwig realized that he was the one triggering the panic. He immediately released him, backing off as Feliciano gripped his chest.

“Sorry.” Ludwig said guiltily, watching helplessly as Feliciano once again had to force his panic away.

“It’s a-alright.” Feliciano gasped out. After a few more minutes of deep breathing, he was finally able to address Ludwig once more, “There was this one, too.”

Ludwig watched in muted horror as Feliciano wordlessly lifted the back of his shirt, turning so he could see the long scar that ran from just above his hip to the center of his back.

Feliciano looked visibly uncomfortable, “You wanted to know what caused this one, right?”

Ludwig remembered writing that down in his notebook, and he was ashamed that he never just outright asked Feliciano for the information, “You don’t have to tell me.”

I’ve lost the right to know.

Feliciano shook his head, releasing his shirt as he turned back to face Ludwig directly, “I don’t want to keep secrets anymore.”

“Yeah, but-”

“I was thrown through a glass table.” Feliciano said, not letting him finish.

Ludwig sucked in a breath through his teeth, not knowing how to respond.

Feliciano’s breathing was coming out far too quickly for Ludwig’s comfort, but he managed to let out a dry laugh anyway, “Lovi got him back, though. He still has a scar under his jaw.”

Ludwig assumed that he meant his father, and could feel just a bit of satisfaction at that.

He deserves worse than that. Much worse.

“This was the reason we moved in with grandpa.” Feliciano started softly.

“Being thrown through a table?” Ludwig clarified.

Feliciano nodded, “I was hurt really bad, and Lovi’s shoulder got really messed up. Toni helped us escape.”

Ludwig suddenly thought of something, “How old were you?”

“Um, I was twelve when we ran.” Feliciano said

“And when did the abuse start?”

Feliciano looked down, thinking hard. Finally he looked up and shrugged, “Since forever, I guess.”

“And your grandpa never noticed before that?” Ludwig asked, unable to believe that the abuse went unnoticed for as long as it apparently did.

Feliciano crossed his arms defensively, “We didn’t see him that often, and Lovi came up with really good excuses. Besides, when Grandpa Roma found out what happened he moved us far away. He left his farm for us, and he even stopped smoking!”

Ludwig backed off of the topic. He had obviously stepped on a landmine, “Okay, okay. Just asking.”

Feliciano still glared, but it was quickly losing its intensity. His shoulders dropped as he let out a weary sigh, “I’m sorry. I’m just so sick of it all.”

Ludwig nodded, thinking that Feliciano had every right to be sick of the situation he was stuck in.

“But it’s okay, it’ll all stop soon.” he said, sounding pained.

What?

Those words brought Ludwig back to reality, and he realized that Feliciano’s horrific past was about to become his present as well, “What do you mean by that?”

Feliciano shook his head, “I don’t want to go back to him, but…”

“But what? There’s no way you can go back.” Ludwig said with finality.

I won’t allow it.

“What do you want me to say here?” Feliciano gasped out as he suddenly stood up and began pacing, “If I don’t give him what he wants, then he’s going to keep ruining our lives.”

“And going back means your life’s not going to be ruined?” Ludwig asked incredulously.

Feliciano groaned loudly, “There’s only one way this is going to stop.”

He’s not seriously considering…

“No, you are not going back.” Ludwig was now standing as well as he stared Feliciano down.

“This isn’t your decision, it’s mine!” he yelled.

Ludwig shook his head, “I don’t care! The fact that you’re even considering going back after the way he treated you… what would your brother say about this?”

“I wouldn’t know because he’s in jail.” Feliciano said coldly, that glare coming back in full force.

“And you going back is going to change that?”

“Yes… no… I don’t know, alright!” Feliciano yelled, tears suddenly back in his eyes, “All I know is that I’m the reason that all of this is happening. If I go back, then this will all stop.” he looked down as he added on quietly, “He promised.”

Ludwig didn’t like the sound of that, “Are you saying you’ve been talking to your father?’

Feliciano glared, “He cornered me last week, that’s why Gil picked me up.”

That’s why he was here. Ludwig realized, finally able to put that little mystery to rest.

“He promised if I went back with him then he'd leave Lovi and Toni alone. It’s selfish of me not to do it.” Feliciano said with resolve even as a terrified look overtook his features.

“You don’t know that, he could be lying.” Ludwig tried to reason, not liking the way Feliciano spoke as if his mind was made up.

“I have to take that chance.” he said solemnly.

“No, you don’t. We can figure something else out.” Ludwig said with a glare.

Feliciano glared right back, “Like what? Because even if I didn’t want to go — which I *don’t,* by the way — I’m going back either way. If I make it easy and give myself up, he’ll leave everyone alone.”

“You could hide out here until this all dies down. Nobody would know!” Ludwig said desperately, even if he knew it wasn’t a realistic solution.

Feliciano just shook his head, “We both know that it wouldn’t work. I’m sorry, but I have to do this.”

Ludwig deflated, not knowing what to say to that. Feliciano slumped his shoulders in resignation as he pushed his hands into his eyes, trying to conceal the tears there.

So that’s it? He’s just giving up?

It certainly looked that way, and Ludwig didn’t know how to put the fight back into Feliciano’s spirit. He seemed to be willing to just give in despite the real danger it posed to his wellbeing. Although Ludwig hadn’t been privy to this situation until that night, it was likely that this had been an ongoing battle. The pressure had to be immense, and it seemed that Feliciano was finally letting the weight crush him.

Feliciano brought his arms down to hang limply by his sides as he brought in a shuddering breath, “I’m sorry I wasted your time. I don’t know what’s going to happen anymore.”

“No, knock that off. You didn’t waste my time and you are *not* allowed to say goodbye.” Ludwig crossed his arms with a little huff.

You may have given up, but I haven’t.

Ludwig put a hand on Feliciano's shoulder and gently pushed him down onto the couch. He didn't resist at all, eyes staring dully ahead as he mumbled, "I wish I could have gotten to know you better."

"Stop." Ludwig said with a glare. While he wasn't catatonic just yet, Ludwig was realizing with some amount of concern that Feliciano was quickly shutting down. It was doubtful that he would move from his spot on the couch, so Ludwig turned on his heel to retrieve his brother.

Gil knows something, he can help.

It was a desperate gamble that Gilbert would have words to dissuade Feliciano of his decision. But it was obvious that his brother had a heavy hand in this whole ordeal, so he was bound to be more convincing than Ludwig.

He approached Gilbert's bedroom door, not even bothering to knock as he burst in. Gilbert was sitting on the edge of his bed, no longer on the phone as he stared at a fixed point on the wall. His foot was tapping madly on the floor and he was muttering to himself, "Gil?"

He whipped his head up, "Huh?"

Ludwig would usually make some kind of remark on his brother's state of inelegance, but as it was he was far too concerned about the Italian who was currently sitting on their couch, "I need your help."

Gilbert was instantly standing, "Why? What happened?"

With a sigh, Ludwig began leading the way back down the hallway, "Feliciano convinced himself that he has to give himself up. He keeps saying that it's the only way for this to stop."

"What?" Gilbert said in alarm as he picked up his pace.

"Yeah, and… and-" they made their way out into an empty living room. Ludwig felt his heart drop in his chest as he looked around wildly for the missing Italian.

He couldn't have…

"Where is he?" Gilbert asked, a nervous edge in his voice.

Ludwig shook his head as he looked towards the door. Dread settled cold and heavy in his stomach when he realized that Feliciano's shoes were missing.

"Ludwig, where is he?" Gilbert asked, grabbing onto his shoulders.

"He ran." Ludwig said in disbelief.

Gilbert released his shoulders, instead glaring as he all but yelled, "He told you that he was going to give himself up, *and you left him alone?!"*

Ludwig rushed to the door, peering down the empty hallway. He truly thought that Feliciano had shut down completely.

I'm such an idiot!

"Shit, I needed to talk to him first!" Gilbert said as he started pacing.

Ludwig whipped around at that, "Wait, you knew he was going to go back?"

Gilbert huffed, "I was trying to find a way around it, but now I guess it doesn't matter. But yes, it was only a matter of time."

"So that's it? Are we never going to see him again after this?" Ludwig asked angrily, unable to believe that his own brother had given up as well.

With a heavy sigh, Gilbert shook his head, "Not necessarily. This is going to court as soon as I can get a hold of Tino. That means that Feli's father can't move them away until after the case is settled." he glared at a spot on the ground, "Which was what I needed to talk to him about, but now I can't."

Ludwig looked away guiltily, unable to believe his own stupidity. Even though this outcome was inevitable, Ludwig still cursed his own inability to put a stop to it. He had really messed up, but he was relieved to hear that there was more to this situation than what he had previously known.

So this isn't over.

"What do we do now?" Ludwig asked, ready to help in any way he could.

Gilbert's shoulders slumped as he sat heavily on the couch, "Nothing."

"Nothing?" Ludwig asked incredulously.

"Look, there's a decent chance that Feli will still go to school like normal as long as he stays in this area. Keep an eye on him, try to talk to him." Gilbert said, gears starting to turn in his head, "Actually, I may know someone that can help with that."

Ludwig cocked his head to the side in confusion, "Who?"

"I'm friends with one of his teachers." Gilbert shook his head, "Nevermind that right now. See if you can get in touch with Feli, try to get him to come back. We could turn this situation to our favor, but if he gives up then this case is as good as done."

"What if I'm too late?" Ludwig asked, already pulling his phone out.

Gilbert sighed, "We'll take it from there." He dragged a hand haphazardly through his hair, "Look, don't blame yourself too hard for this, he was going to go back either way. At least this way he could do things on his own terms."

Ludwig just closed his eyes, taking a deep breath, “Just... tell me this is going to turn out okay.”

He listened for a response, but felt his heart drop when none was forthcoming. Ludwig opened his eyes and found that Gilbert had his head in his hands. Finally, after a tense silence, he answered, “I don’t know.”

Ludwig sat down next to him on the couch, having no more words to share. He kept sending text messages to Feliciano, pleading with him to come back. But Ludwig really didn’t expect an answer.

With another shake of the head, Ludwig resigned himself to the fact that he was just going to have to wait and see what happened. Above all, he just wanted to see Feliciano again. The way he had spoken made it seem like they were never going to see each other again.

But Gil said he would still be at school.

That, at least, was a small mercy in this otherwise tortuous situation. He leaned his head back until it rested against the back of the couch, closing his eyes. Ludwig knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep that night, so he decided to make himself comfortable on the couch on the off chance that he got through to Feliciano. With that in mind, he opened up his phone to send one last text:

To: Feliciano

Stay safe.

Chapter End Notes

Hope y'all didn't think this was going to get much happier, because I'm gonna have to disappoint...

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! Hope you liked this chapter, I feel so evil making everything worse for these poor characters. Will it get better? Who knows ;)

On another note, I didn't really want to bring it up since we're already being bombarded by the media, but this outbreak is getting really bad. Where I live we aren't allowed to leave our homes, and I know it's just as bad if not worse elsewhere. That being said, stay safe. Hopefully I can provide a little bit of entertainment in this dark time with this story.

Love you all, stay safe my lovelies <3

'Till next time

Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was walking swiftly down the street, hands shoved deep in his pockets and eyes fixed solely on the chipped sidewalk before him. He was trying to ignore the guilt he felt for sneaking away as soon as Ludwig had left, but he knew he had to take the chance to run when it presented itself.

With a sigh, he kept speeding down the sidewalk, his way only illuminated by bland yellow streetlights. Feliciano had no idea what he was doing. He knew that they were looking for him, but he didn't know who *they* were. What was more troubling yet was that he didn't know *where* they were.

Where would someone look for me?

He decided to head down in the general direction of his apartment. Besides Ludwig and Gilbert's apartment, there was no other place he would be. With a confident nod to himself, Feliciano put his head down and marched determinedly down the street towards his chosen fate.

There's no other choice.

In his heart, Feliciano knew this to be true, but that didn't make the decision any easier to make. But while talking with Ludwig he realized that this drama started and ended with him. He was surrendering in a wild hope that Lovino and Antonio would finally be left alone and everything would finally just *stop.* Feliciano realized that neither of them would understand his decision, but they would learn to accept it. They would move on. Without him.

There was a lump forming in his throat at the thought, but he carried on. While the way he walked betrayed no underlying nervousness, Feliciano was terrified. He didn't know why his father wanted him back, but if he had gone through this much trouble to get him, then it was undoubtedly something significant. They had been stalked, harassed, and now Lovino was in jail facing possible charges all because of Feliciano. It was troubling to say the least that Cristiano was so obsessively determined to destroy their already miserable lives. After all, he had let both Feliciano and Lovino go with very little fuss all those years ago.

What changed?

Feliciano shook his head to himself, not bothering to waste time on the thought when he was about to find out for himself. At least, he hoped.

He was getting closer to his destination and he realized with apprehension that his hands were already starting to shake.

No, I am sick of shutting down!

Feliciano grit his teeth and balled his hands into fists. His reaction to stressful situations was pitiful, and it was about time he had some control over himself. Unfortunately, that was easier said than done, and he couldn't just stop the anxiety no matter how hard he willed his heart rate to slow or his breathing to even out or his hands to *just stop shaking!*

Panicking was not an option at the moment, as Feliciano knew that he needed to be able to think clearly in the following hours. But he was beginning to realize what his decision entailed, just who he was going back to. After all, it was the very man who Feliciano was giving himself up to that was the catalyst to most of his mental health problems. Cristiano had weaponized his anxiety from a young age, making him feel like he was worthless or just faking it for attention.

Needless to say, the narrative Feliciano was fed stuck to him like a parasite, and a vicious one at that. He wondered briefly how different his life would be if he had grown up in a stable household with loving parents and a healthy social life. Would he still have trouble controlling his anxiety? Would he still get panic attacks the moment someone raised their voice? Would he still be plagued by every other mental health crisis he had had since he was a child?

Maybe it's just me.

That thought gave him pause. After all, could Feliciano truly pin the entirety of the blame on his upbringing? Maybe it was actually himself and his traitorous mind that were the blame. After all, the abuse had to have started for some reason. Feliciano couldn't even humor the idea that someone would just be cruel for the sake of being cruel — he had (perhaps too much) faith in people to ever believe that.

Feliciano huffed, squeezing his eyes shut as he tried to block out his thoughts. It wasn't healthy to try and rationalize something as mindless as abuse. It didn't stop him trying, but now was certainly not the time to agonize over it. Not when he had reached his destination.

He was pleased to note that he had chosen correctly in heading towards his apartment as there was a cop car sitting outside the building. Feliciano wondered if it was waiting for him, quickly deciding that the answer was *yes* as an officer opened the door and began approaching him.

No going back now.

The officer was a tall middle-aged man with black hair and a rather comical mustache. His lips were turned in a perpetual frown, but he had kind blue eyes. Feliciano stopped where he was, allowing the cop to approach him. This was his decision, and he was going to go through with it despite what anybody thought.

He gulped as the cop halted in front of him, towering over Feliciano as he cleared his throat, "You Feliciano?"

The man had a bit of a southern accent and had wildly mispronounced his name, but Feliciano gave a shaky smile anyway, "Y-yeah." he mentally cursed the stutter.

The officer nodded to himself, gesturing towards his car as he said, “I’m taking you home, come with me.”

Home.

The phrasing was rather curious and Feliciano briefly wondered what kind of lies Cristiano had been feeding people. Any place with *that man* under its roof was no home to Feliciano, but he held his tongue and followed wordlessly behind the cop.

Feliciano kept his hands clenched as he got in the back of the car. He could feel his heart pounding madly in his chest as the car began meandering its way down the dark streets. His body was still reacting rather poorly to his decision, but his mind was clear.

I have no choice, I’m ending this now.

That was the mantra Feliciano had to keep repeating to himself lest he truly begin panicking in earnest. The cop didn’t even bother trying to start a conversation, and Feliciano got the impression that he didn’t talk much anyway. It was fine by him, as Feliciano doubted he could speak without breaking down and begging the man to take him back.

I wonder if I’ll be allowed to say goodbye.

Feliciano’s chest hurt at the thought. At the very least he needed to get into contact with either his brother or Antonio to tell them not to go forward with the court case. It would only prolong the inevitable, and Feliciano didn’t think he could bear to watch his brother break after he lost.

Can he still go to court?

Lovino being in jail definitely complicated things, and with a pang Feliciano realized that he had barely spared a thought for Antonio. He was all alone, now that both brothers were being imprisoned in their respective jails. Feliciano felt nauseous at the thought of the cheerful Spaniard laying in the empty apartment, completely abandoned.

For the first time that night Feliciano wondered if he really thought this decision through.

He was about to pull out his phone, to explain, apologize to Antonio, but he wasn’t given the chance. Feliciano was shocked to find that they had apparently arrived at their destination after a relatively short drive. They were on the opposite side of town, but still pretty close to his school. Feliciano supposed that it made sense that Cristiano lived so close. After all, he had been keeping a distressingly close eye on all of them, a feat that would be difficult to accomplish had he lived far away.

The cop let Feliciano out of the car. With a slight gasp of surprise, Feliciano looked around at his father’s apparent place of residence.

It was a house, and a nice one at that. While the property surrounding wasn’t exactly anything to brag about, there was a rather nice-looking picketed fence surrounding the modest yard. It was only one story, but extremely well-kept. The neighboring houses looked

just as nice, each one identical to the last. The pristine white paint on the walls looked fresh and the lawn was meticulously cared for, not a blade of grass out of place.

Feliciano was confused. While they hadn't been particularly poor in Italy, they had been by no means wealthy. Their mother had walked out when he was still a young child, and Cristiano had worked at a relatively low-paying job as a security guard. Roma, on the other hand, was profoundly wealthy and would send a check in the mail every month to help them out, but Feliciano had no idea where that money went. Whatever Cristiano spent it on was probably for his own benefit, and it was doubtful that it had gone into a savings account.

Where did he get the money for this?

There was just no way that Cristiano would be able to move across countries and buy a house *this nice.* It just didn't add up, and Feliciano suspected that there was more going on than any of them knew about.

The cop motioned for Feliciano to follow him, but his feet felt like they were cemented to the ground. He noted distantly that his hands were still shaking, and he could feel tremors begin to overtake his whole body. He had been so sure of his decision, but now he realized just how impulsively he had acted.

Unable to go back now, Feliciano forced one foot forward. Then the other. Again. It wasn't long before he was walking behind the cop up to the front door. Dread sat in the pit of his stomach as the doorbell was pressed. And they waited.

Suddenly the door whipped open, causing Feliciano to jump at least a few feet in the air. Cristiano looked contemptuously at the cop before he spotted Feliciano standing shakily behind him. Confusion briefly crossed his face before he masked it with a proper look of concern.

"Feli! You're back, thank God!" Cristiano cried in apparent relief. Feliciano's breath caught in his throat at the nickname.

The cop nodded, a small smile of approval on his face as he stepped to the side, allowing Feliciano a direct path to the last place he wanted to be. He took a tentative step forward as the cop said, "Found him walking down the street. Glad we could reunite you two." The man sounded so genuine, and Feliciano wondered if he had a family of his own.

Cristiano nodded with a broad smile, *"Grazie!* I was just so worried, thank God you found him!"

Feliciano's skin crawled at the overly thankful tone his father was using. Cristiano was a wonderful actor, and he sure could act like a doting parent when needed.

The cop nodded, seemingly satisfied with the response. Feliciano realized that he had yet to take more than a step towards the doorway. He met eyes with his father and found encouragement there. Only, Feliciano saw past that. That saccharine smile seemed a little too sharp, and Feliciano could hear the threat clear as day when Cristiano said, "Come inside."

With a shaky breath, Feliciano forced his body to move. He made his way to the doorway, flinching when Cristiano clapped an *inviting* hand on his shoulder as he was pulled fully into the house.

“Well, I guess I’ll leave you be. Nice meeting you young man.” the officer said with a slight bow of his head.

Feliciano nodded, not really trusting his voice. However, at the sharp squeeze to his shoulder he managed to squeak out, “Nice meeting you, too.”

With a final wave at the police officer, Cristiano closed the door.

It was unnerving just how quiet everything got as soon as the outside world was cut off. Feliciano marvelled at the power that the door had. The house became a new reality, completely isolated from the world surrounding them. Nothing existed in that house. Nothing but Feliciano and his father.

Feliciano noticed how Cristiano had yet to remove his hand from his shoulder. He could probably feel the way Feliciano shook, but he didn’t comment on it. Instead, he steered his son deeper into the house.

It wasn’t nearly as nice as the outside.

The house from the outside looked pristine, but the inside was just the opposite. For starters, it was dark. There was a singular lamp shining in a rather subdued manner in the corner of the living room, as well as the soft glow of the TV playing quietly in the background. The couch looked new, but was already dirty. There were cigarette butts littering the smooth hardwood flooring, and the rug was dusted with ash. A wall separated the living room from the kitchen where Feliciano noticed with some disgust that a mountain of dirty dishes was accumulating in the sink.

All in all, the house was a mess.

“Okay,” Cristiano growled as he shoved Feliciano forward. He went careening into the nearest wall, catching himself before he could crash into it. He stood up and realized that he was standing face to face with his father. Cristiano crossed his arms over his chest as an annoyed scowl overtook his features, “What are you playing at?”

Feliciano’s heart sped up as he tried to piece together a coherent response. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t know what Cristiano was talking about, “I-I don’t… what?”

Cristiano sighed as he rolled his eyes, “Y’know, I expected a little bit of a fight. Really, I was ready to track down that German nuisance myself, but here you are and willingly it seems!” he looked at Feliciano condescendingly as he said, “Change of heart?”

Feliciano wasn’t sure exactly what Cristiano was getting at, but he was probably referring to the night they had talked where he had vehemently refused his father’s every attempt to persuade him to leave. It made sense that Cristiano was a little suspicious that Feliciano was suddenly acting so compliant.

When Feliciano didn't immediately offer an answer, Cristiano took a step forward and really studied his son. Whatever he found in Feliciano's terrified face caused him to take a step back with a smug look, "Oh, you don't have a plan at all. You just gave up."

That snapped Feliciano out his daze, "No, I didn't give up!"

Cristiano laughed at that, "No?"

Feliciano shook his head, "You said this would stop if I went with you. Well, I'm here, so you can leave everybody alone." he finished with a huff, his determination coming back full force.

"Did I say that?" Cristiano said, bringing a finger up to tap thoughtfully on his chin.

Feliciano glared, something he never thought he would have the nerve to do with his father, but he was too irritated to register how bad an idea that was, "Yes, you did."

Cristiano glared right back, a look that was much more intimidating on his face, "Don't you dare cop an attitude with me."

That brought Feliciano down from his momentary boldness, as he instantly dropped his eyes to fix them on the ground. He wasn't there to confront Cristiano, he was there to appease him in hopes that he would stop messing with everybody's lives. Making him angry would solve nothing, and Feliciano decided to mumble out a quiet, "Sorry."

"You will be if you don't knock that off." Cristiano grumbled. "I'll leave them alone so long as you do as I say."

Feliciano flinched at the tone, remembering his earlier terror. They still faced each other in the hallway, but Cristiano hadn't made a move towards him. Feliciano supposed that he should feel encouraged by that, but something told him that the peace wouldn't last. Cristiano had a temper more explosive than Lovino's, and Feliciano's bubbly personality always seemed to piss him off. He tried to suppress it, but how can someone just turn their personality off like a switch?

Well, there's one way.

While Feliciano couldn't force himself to dissociate, he knew ways to trigger the response. Dissociation was his brain's defense mechanism when things got too overwhelming, and all he had to do was let his thoughts spiral until he became an outsider to his own life. It wasn't hard given his anxiety was already at an all-time high. It would take minimal effort to start overthinking things, letting his past and present completely overwhelm him. Was it healthy? Absolutely not. Was Feliciano willing to do it anyway? You bet.

But now wasn't the time, it seemed, as Cristiano shook his head before pointing sharply down the hall, "Your room is at the end on the left. I don't want to so much as hear you for the rest of the night, got it?"

Feliciano nodded quickly, waiting to turn his back to Cristiano until the man made a move first.

“Oi, answer me!” he said loudly.

“Yes, I understand.” Feliciano rushed out.

Cristiano huffed, “Good.”

Realizing that Cristiano wasn’t going anywhere until Feliciano left, he began backing down the hallway. He did so cautiously, waiting for the other shoe to drop. It never did, and Feliciano was about a quarter of the way down the hallway when Cristiano spoke up:

“Wait,” Cristiano stepped forward, reaching his hand out, “give it up.”

Feliciano looked at him in confusion, “Wha-”

“Your phone.” Cristiano said in annoyance, looking like he was holding himself back.

“Oh.”

That was a problem. Feliciano needed his phone, the device the only piece left of his previous life he had left. He hadn’t looked at it since he ran, and now he was very much regretting that action. He may never be able to look at it again.

Feliciano hesitated, and Cristiano grew impatient. With a menacing step forward, he cuffed Feliciano upside the head, causing him to stumble to the side, as he said, “Now.”

Feliciano’s head was already throbbing from the blow, even though he really hadn’t been hit that hard. Well, relative to what he knew this man was capable of. Without another word, he fumbled in his pocket for his phone and gave it up.

Cristiano swiped it from his hand and shoved it into his own pocket. Seemingly satisfied, he turned on his heel and disappeared back into the living room without another word.

Feliciano was left reeling in the hallway, bringing a shaky hand up to rub his head. It hurt, but the pain wasn’t unbearable. What was unbearable was the fact that he had officially given up his freedom. His communication to the outside world had been cut off, and he was now a willing prisoner at the mercy of the one person he had fought so hard to escape from.

Dio, what am I doing?

He had to remember that it was for his brother, and Antonio too. After all, he only had two years until he turned eighteen. Feliciano spent twelve years of his life learning to read his father and keep out of his way. He could do this. He had to.

So why did his chest still hurt so much?

Feliciano could feel his hands grow clammy, and his vision began to blur. The panic he had so desperately tried to stave off was coming back full force, and he realized that there was no

stopping it this time.

He stumbled down the hallway, deciding that it was best to shut himself away before his father could question why he was dawdling. He made it to his new room and closed the door as quietly as he could behind him. The bedroom looked completely untouched, a dresser in the corner and a mirror on the closet door. The bed was unmade, but Feliciano really could care less at the moment.

Still stumbling quite terribly, Feliciano made his way to the bed before kicking his shoes off. In his last moments of coherency, he was able to spot a pillow sitting atop the dresser. There was probably more bedding in the dresser itself, but his hands were shaking so badly he doubted that opening the drawers was even an option right then.

He flopped down on the bed, hugging the pillow tightly as he buried his face in it. He was trying to muffle his gasped breathing, and he honestly couldn't tell if it was working or not. His body curled in on itself as tears streamed down his face. Breathing exercises were useless, and trying to convince himself that the panic wasn't justified was futile because the panic really *was* justified.

His body kept shaking, and it was getting harder to breathe. Distantly he hoped that he would stop breathing entirely.

I'm sorry.

Everyone had wasted their time on him. In the end, he had just given up. He didn't regret his choice as Cristiano had said he would finally leave everyone alone, but he did hate how easily he had been reverted back to the scared little kid who could do nothing but throw a panicked fit in his room.

With a grunt of pain, Feliciano brought a hand up to rub the spot where he had been hit. He squeezed his eyes shut as he felt his head throb, further reminding him of his pitiful state. His breathing picked up even further as he gripped his hair almost painfully.

His vision began to swim, consciousness slipping away from him. His last thoughts were of his brother, and he hoped that he was doing alright. Antonio too, for that matter. Both of them would be angry with him, furious even that he had given up. But Feliciano knew in his heart that he had freed them, and he could live with that.

He began to choke on his breath as he felt his body slacken. Feliciano resolved himself to face his decision without complaint when he woke up, and as his vision finally melted away into a cool black, he whispered out a silent apology to everyone who wasted their time on him.

So sorry.

Chapter End Notes

...did I mention that his story is angsty?

I'm so sorry my poor sunshine child. Lol I'm trying to pinpoint exactly when this story got so dark, and I really can't. Guess it was gradual, but I didn't even notice until I was rereading some of the older chapters. Oh well!

Anyways, thanks so so so much for reading. This story has seriously kept me going, and I love writing it. You guys keep me going too, like fr every comment is so sweet and like I didn't expect people to actually like this that much? Like this started out as a completely self-indulgent thing to distract me from life, but y'all have been so encouraging and stuff. It means so much to me, thank you!!

Ugh, sorry to be all mushy there for a sec, but it makes me so happy. I promise not to break these poor characters...that badly ;)

Another thing: I work at a grocery store so I see all the madness going on right now and some people seriously make me nervous. That being said, stay safe out there. Love you all <3

'Till next time!

Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gilbert was walking determinedly down the sidewalk, hands shoved deep in his pockets as he watched his breath vaporize in the frigid air. The sun hung low in the sky, and while Gilbert was loath to be up at this ungodly time in the morning (*seriously, who in the hell is up at eight in the morning?*), he had an important errand to run.

Everything had been happening so quickly; it was just last night that Feliciano had run, and Ludwig had been unable to get into contact with him. Neither Gilbert nor his brother were able to get much sleep last night, and Gilbert was slowly losing hope. He feared for Feliciano's safety just as much as he feared that Lovino would be going to jail for a very long time. Gilbert also felt something in the back of his mind, like he was forgetting something… or someone...

Ah shit, I need to check on Antonio!

Gilbert felt like bashing his head in the wall for forgetting about him. He probably had no idea what had happened to Feliciano, and Gilbert realized with some guilt that Antonio probably still thought that the young Italian was still safely tucked away in his apartment. Gilbert made a mental note to check in with him, but first he needed to talk to a certain lawyer.

Gilbert burst into the office building where he knew that Tino already was. The receptionist attempted to speak, but Gilbert was already marching down the hallway. Without a singular thought to such things like *manners,* he threw the door open.

He was met by a wide-eyed Tino sitting behind his desk, "Gil-"

"I need to talk to you." Gilbert interrupted breathlessly, "Now."

Tino simply nodded, gesturing to the seat in front of him, "Sure, what's up?"

Gilbert plopped down heavily on the chair, running a hand through his hair as he said, "It's Lovino."

"What about him?" Tino asked, eyebrows furrowed in worry.

"He was arrested…" Gilbert recounted all of the events of the previous night, including the way Feliciano had fled to his father. He told Tino about the charges Lovino was facing, and more than a few words regarding his own personal opinion on the matter. By the time he was done, Gilbert was slumped back in his chair trying to gauge Tino's reaction.

He was not pleased, to say the least, "This is… *total bullshit!"*

Gilbert jumped at the sudden cursing. Sometimes he forgot that Tino was actually quite the fighter despite his small size and gentle demeanor. Without another word, he launched from his chair and yanked open a filing cabinet, grabbing a small stack of documents.

“This should be illegal.” Tino grumbled as he smacked the papers down on his desk and started rifling through them, “Do you realize what this… this horrible man is trying to do here?”

While Gilbert had a few ideas, he was curious as to what Tino thought was going on, “What’s he up to?”

Tino looked up with a glare, “He’s keeping Lovino tied up so he can take what he wants and leave.”

Gilbert sighed heavily, having already suspected that. But Tino wasn’t done:

“He’s clever. Very clever.”

“What do you mean?” Gilbert asked with a hint of trepidation.

Tino’s eyes darkened evermore as he attempted to explain the full picture, “It was a longshot that Cristiano would be able to slip away quietly, and he knew that. So he took some preventative steps.”

Gilbert felt his blood run cold, “What steps?”

“I mean,” Tino cleared his throat as he continued to pull out various documents out of the stack of papers on his desk, “Lovino now has this blemish on his record. It doesn’t look good on him, obviously. But it’s worse than that — now Cristiano has complete control of the biggest piece of evidence we had.”

Gilbert gasped in realization, “You mean Feli?”

Tino jerked his head in affirmation, “If his father is as physically and psychologically abusive as Lovino made him out to be — which I have no reason to doubt — then Feliciano probably won’t give his testimony. At the very least, he’ll probably be intimidated into leaving out key details about his childhood.”

Key details…

“You mean anything that has to do with the abuse.” Gilbert said sullenly.

“Exactly.”

Gilbert brought a hand down over his face before a thought came to him, “What can we do now? I mean, Lovino is definitely getting charged with at least forgery and probably fraud too.”

And there’s the neglect charge…

Tino made a noise of dissent, “Both of those are misdemeanors in his case. He’ll get off with a fine.”

Gilbert breathed a deep sigh of relief, “Awesome. And the neglect charge?”

“It’s bullshit.” Tino said shortly. “They’ll drop it.”

Gilbert nodded in agreement, but asked, “So what was the point of accusing him of neglect if it’s just going to get dropped?”

“It was to guarantee that he’d get arrested. A judge wouldn’t order a warrant for a misdemeanor, but neglect,” Tino sighed heavily, “that’s another story.”

“But a misdemeanor doesn’t disqualify him from custody, right?” Gilbert asked. “Cristiano had to have known that these charges wouldn’t stick.”

Tino groaned as he seemed to realize something himself, “The charges won’t stick, but the fines will.”

“What do you mean?”

“Lovino told me that they struggled financially. He even admitted to not being able to pay this month’s rent unless he found a job.” Tino ran a hand through his hair.

“Oh…”

Oh no.

“Crafty son of a bitch.” Gilbert mumbled.

Tino laughed without a hint of humor, “My sentiments exactly.”

Gilbert was livid, even if his slumped position on the chair didn’t betray it. As Tino had said, Cristiano was one clever piece of work. He had cornered them, making it so this custody case was dead on arrival.

It made Gilbert sick that Cristiano knew exactly where to hit them where it hurt. By tipping off the police, Lovino was helpless to stop his brother from being swiped from right under their noses. Not only that, but the fines he was facing were no doubt hefty. Without money to pay for rent, he and Antonio would be out on the streets — not exactly the *stable* household the court was looking for. From every angle, this case was through.

“What are we going to do?” Gilbert asked, not really expecting anything.

Tino huffed loudly, surprising him by saying, “I’m going to serve his ass.”

“There’s still a case?” he asked incredulously.

“There’s always a case. We’re still missing one detail, and depending on what that is, we could still win this.” Tino said with determination.

“And that detail is…?” Gilbert prompted.

“We still don’t know *why.”* Tino sounded annoyed, “Why Feliciano? What’s so important that Cristiano *needs* custody over him?”

Gilbert had asked that very question a million times over without ever getting closer to the answer. But maybe Feliciano himself could tell them, “Wait a sec, do you think Feli will keep going to the same school?”

Tino looked thoughtful before nodding slowly, “It’s highly likely. Cristiano is probably being advised by an attorney in order to make himself look as good as possible in case this went to court.”

“What’s to say he won’t just move them anyways?” Gilbert asked.

“It would be hard to justify taking his son out of school, or even moving him. He has an established social life there, and if he really was looking out for Feliciano’s best interests like he’ll claim, then he’ll let him stay at his current school.” Tino reasoned.

Gilbert nodded, for once feeling a spark of hope in his chest, “Perfect! If I can get my brother to talk to him, then maybe Feli could find out the truth and tell us.”

“So use him as an ‘informant,’ so to speak?” Tino asked.

“Yeah!” Gilbert said excitedly.

Tino shrugged, “I guess that could work, but we don’t want to put him in any unnecessary danger either. Our first priority should be his safety.”

Gilbert curbed some of his excitement at that, realizing that Feliciano really *was* in danger, “Of course.”

“I’m going to make sure everything’s in order, then I’ll file everything today. Just leave it to me.” Tino said with a bright, if not jaded, smile.

Gilbert nodded his appreciation, reaching a hand out to shake, “Thanks man. Have I ever told you that you’re the most awesome attorney ever?”

Tino chuckled, shaking Gilbert’s hand as he said, “I think you could stand to say it more, loudmouth.”

Gilbert gaped, “Loudmouth?!”

With a bright laugh, Tino responded, “Sorry, just something I picked up from Lovino.”

“Great.” Gilbert said under his breath, irritated that Lovino had apparently influenced the cheeky lawyer.

“But seriously,” Tino said as he schooled his face back into something more professional, “keep me in the loop. If I can help in any way, please let me know. I just can’t stand the

thought of someone living in an abusive household… not when I can do something about it."

Me neither.

Gilbert simply nodded in response, deciding to take his leave at those words. He shared Tino's sentiments exactly, which was a large reason that he was in his current profession. But this case was personal to him, both Italians having wormed their way into his life. Besides the fact that Feliciano was dating his brother, the teen was so kind and gentle — of course Gilbert couldn't help but feel protective over him. And Lovino, too. While the two didn't know each other particularly well, and every conversation started and ended with biting insults, it was obvious that Lovino trusted him. Gilbert didn't take that lightly, and he had vowed that he would do everything in his power to help.

He walked out of the door and back outside to face the chill air. He began walking before suddenly recalling something:

Oh, right! I need to go make sure Antonio's okay.

Antonio was probably a mess, and Gilbert needed to make sure that he hadn't broken entirely under the pressure. So he made his way down the sidewalk, the sun just a little higher in the sky as he tried to think of a way out of the impossible situation they were in.

Gilbert looked down at his phone, trying to confirm that he was indeed in the right place. Ludwig had sent him the address to Antonio's apartment, and it seemed that he had made it.

With a sigh, Gilbert knocked loudly on the door. He waited impatiently, tapping his foot on the ground. After a few minutes went by, he knocked again, "Hey, Antonio? It's me, Gil."

Still nothing.

Gilbert was getting nervous, so he decided to try the door. He was shocked when he found it was unlocked. He attempted to push it open, but the door wouldn't budge. Gilbert leaned his shoulder into it, realizing that something was blocking his path.

Dammit, don't tell me he barricaded himself inside!

That seemed a little drastic, even if Antonio was on edge. Gilbert continued to push at the door, finally opening it up enough to slip through.

He was shocked at what he found.

Laying on the ground directly in the door's path was Antonio. He was still out cold, and it was obvious to Gilbert that he had been there all night.

The fuck?

Gilbert was instantly kneeling, shaking Antonio roughly on the shoulder. After a few more tries, the Spaniard peeled his eyes open and fixed Gilbert with a confused look. If the

situation weren't so serious, Gilbert would have laughed at the dazed expression on his face, "Dude, are you alright?"

"Huh?" Antonio asked, finally sitting up on his own. His clothes were wrinkled up, and one of his cheeks was red from where it had rested on the tile below him.

Christ, he's a mess.

Gilbert was getting seriously worried at the lack of response. Antonio simply looked straight ahead, his eyes cycling through emotions so quickly that Gilbert couldn't pinpoint what he was feeling before he had already moved on.

Finally his eyes widened to an almost comical degree as he shot up, "Oh shit, Lovi!"

Antonio stood up so fast that he nearly toppled over. Gilbert was just able to stand quick enough, shooting a hand out to steady him, "Woah, man. Take it easy."

"Where is he?" He looked around wildly, like he was expecting Lovino to just materialize.

Does he really not remember? Jesus, just how out of it is he?

"Wait, if you're here, then something happened." Antonio studied Gilbert carefully, a look of horror overtaking his features as he gripped the German by his shoulders, "What's wrong? Is Feli okay?"

Gilbert looked down in shame as he tried to avoid Antonio's pleading gaze, "I'm sorry."

I couldn't stop him.

The grip on his shoulders suddenly became painful as Antonio craned his neck to meet Gilbert's downcast eyes, "What do you mean by that?"

Gilbert bit at his lip. This encounter was much more difficult than he thought it would be. While this had been an inevitable outcome, it didn't make breaking the news any easier.

Antonio's face went white as the silence persisted, "Don't tell me he's… he's…"

"Gone."

The grip on Gilbert's shoulders loosened considerably as Antonio deflated. Gilbert sighed heavily, "How about we take a seat?"

Antonio nodded, pointing wordlessly at the kitchen table. They made their way over and sat heavily across from each other. Gilbert tapped his foot anxiously as he tried to think of the right words to say. He looked up, finding Antonio waiting with bated breath, his eyes red-rimmed and hair sticking up wildly. With another exhausted sigh, Gilbert spoke, "Are you okay?"

With a wry laugh Antonio gestured towards his current state of dishevelment, "Do you even need to ask?"

“Right, sorry.” Gilbert ran a hand through his hair, not sure what to say.

Antonio opened his mouth before closing it again. He seemed to struggle with himself before asking anxiously, “Can you… can you tell me what happened?”

Gilbert nodded, “I told Feli what happened to Lovino. He didn’t react well.”

Antonio closed his eyes, seeming pained, “He blamed himself, didn’t he?”

“Yeah.” Gilbert said softly. “Ludwig said that he was determined to go back. Apparently Feli thought he could ‘make everything stop’ if he gave himself up.”

“Of course he did.” Antonio scrubbed at his eyes, looking lost. *“Dios,* what am I going to do?”

While the question was obviously rhetorical, Gilbert felt that he owed him an answer, “You can start by not giving up.”

Antonio snorted sardonically, “Really? That’s the best you can come up with? Because now looks like the perfect time to give up.” He crossed his arms with a glare.

Gilbert recoiled a bit at the sudden vitriol in his voice, “Look, I know that this feels like it’s over but-”

“But what?” Antonio was standing now, starting to pace in the kitchen as Gilbert could only watch in astonishment, “I don’t think you get it. The only people I care about in this entire *fucking* world are gone!”

“I do get it, man. I care about them, too.” Gilbert tried.

Antonio scoffed, rounding on him as he threw out an accusation, “Then why didn’t you stop this from happening? Why didn’t you help?”

“I-I tried-”.

“Well you didn’t try hard enough! What am I supposed to do now that I’m… I’m…”

Alone.

Antonio sniffled, anger gone as quickly as it had appeared. He sat back down and buried his head in his hands, “I’m all alone now, aren’t I? *Oh Dios ayúdame.”*

Gilbert simply sat with wide eyes, not exactly sure what to say. The explosive anger had dissipated so quickly that he was surprised that Antonio didn’t have whiplash at the sudden change in mood.

“I’m sorry, just-” Antonio cut himself off with another sniffle. It was likely that he was crying, but with his head still buried in his hands, Gilbert couldn’t be sure.

“You’re stressed out, dude, I don’t blame you. And you’re not alone, I’m not gonna abandon you.” Gilbert said, trying to cut through Antonio’s hopelessness.

“Thanks, but that doesn’t bring either of them back.” Antonio said quietly.

Gilbert sighed, “Look, it’s not all doom and gloom, I still have some good news.”

Antonio looked up at that, and the tears streaming down his face confirmed that he was indeed crying, “Good news?”

His voice was so desperate and Gilbert could feel his heart ache, “Yeah, I talked to a lawyer. He basically told me that the charges against Lovino were bullshit. They’re not going to stick, he’ll be home in another day or two max.”

Antonio’s breath caught in his throat, “Really?”

Gilbert allowed himself a small smile, “Yeah, really.”

“Oh, that’s good.” Antonio wiped some of his tears away, his breath still uneven as he obviously tried to stave off another emotional outburst.

There’s no way he’s okay.

To say Gilbert was worried was a gross understatement. While he didn’t really blame Antonio for his emotionally volatile state, it was obvious that he wouldn’t be able to function on his own. In an instant, Gilbert made a decision, “Go get your things.”

“Huh?” Antonio cocked his head to the side curiously.

Gilbert stood, “Get your things. You’re gonna stay with me for a while.”

At least until Lovino comes home.

Antonio was still sniffling, “You don’t have to do that, I’ll be fine.”

“Bullshit.” Gilbert snorted. “Be honest with me. If I left you by yourself, would you just go lay in bed all day feeling sorry for yourself?”

Antonio shifted nervously, “Uh, well…”

“You have a job too, right? Shouldn’t you be there now?” Gilbert pushed.

“I mean, yeah. But, like…” he sighed, realizing that he didn’t have a valid excuse.

Gilbert crossed his arms, “Exactly. Now get your stuff, we have a guest room you can use.”

Antonio looked a little sheepish, but mumbled out a quiet, “Thank you.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Gilbert smiled, pleased when Antonio disappeared deeper into the apartment to gather his things.

It was only a handful of minutes later when Antonio returned, bag slung over his shoulder. He nodded at Gilbert, and they wordlessly exited the apartment.

As they walked down the hallway, Antonio, wearing a look on his face that could only be described as *broken,* asked, “Are we ever going to see Feli again?”

Gilbert audibly gulped as he weighed his options. On the one hand, he could give Antonio false hope. He could say that Tino was the best at what he did, and that there was no way he would let them lose this case.

On the other hand, Gilbert could be honest. In his personal opinion, he wasn’t all that confident in their chances — not unless there was some breakthrough in the case. While Gilbert had told Antonio not to give up, he didn’t know how much longer he himself could hold onto hope.

With a sigh, he decided on the neutral option, “I hope so.”

Antonio nodded, eyes downcast as he led the way out of the building, “Me too.”

Chapter End Notes

Yo.

Don't have much to say about this one, except I feel bad that I'm so mean to these characters. I realize I have the power to let them be happy, but I am simply not doing it. God that makes me sound like the worst lmao.

Anyways, thanks so much for reading! I can't believe I let this thing get so long, but here we are. Hope you liked the chapter, lemme know what y'all think!

Translation:
Dios ayudame: God help me

Alrighty, that's all I got. Love you all, have a good one!

'Till next time!

Chapter 40

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino sat idly in a barren holding cell, the fluorescent lights doing nothing to abate the throbbing that thrummed dully at the base of his skull. He had been sitting alone for nearly two days now, and quite frankly he was about to naw his own hand off from the sheer *boredom.*

He grumbled wordlessly to himself, sick and tired of the same six by eight view. It was a miracle that he hadn't lost it completely yet, and really he would love to rant and rave to someone (or hell, even himself), but he needed to project an image of cool stability. He had done well so far. There had been very little fuss when they had arrived at the jailhouse — Lovino being forced to play nice or risk exacerbating the already worst-case-scenario. It was infuriating to not bite back at every order he was given, but to fight was to risk everything he had worked so hard for.

As if it's even worth it anymore.

Lovino scowled to himself, wondering if this was the final nail in the coffin. In all honesty, he had kind of expected this outcome. It was the reason he had acted so calmly when he heard that awful knock on his door.

With a sigh, Lovino leaned forward on the bench he was sitting on as he tried to rub the pain away from behind his eyes. He hated waiting, but he quite literally had no other choice. He thought of his brother and Antonio too, praying that they had left.

"You better be gone when I get out of here, bastard." Lovino mumbled to himself.

While he truly did hope that Antonio did as he was told, Lovino knew that it was a longshot. Knowing Antonio, he had probably overthought the situation and shut down completely. If Feliciano had been taken back, Lovino thought that he may lose it completely. He tried desperately not to humor the thought that his brother was already gone, but it was difficult when he had nothing else to do.

Lovino shook his head, obliterating that line of thought before it could send him into a blind fury. He couldn't afford any slip-ups. Not now, and especially since he was due to be released in the next day or so from what he had gathered. Well, assuming he didn't get charged for neglect.

He scoffed at the thought.

Of all the bullshit charges.

Lovino suspected — nevermind, he was *confident* — that Cristiano was the source of that profoundly groundless accusation. While he hadn't been convicted of anything yet, and there

was nothing to substantiate the ludicrous claim, Lovino knew that this was done on purpose. It was all a sick joke to that horrible man, accusing him of a crime that Cristiano himself had committed. It was spiteful, disgusting even, and Lovino was having a hard time subduing his murderous fantasies.

Unfortunately a murder charge would look rather *unfavorable* on his record, although it would solve quite a few of Lovino's current problems.

He breathed in deeply, exhaling as he willed himself to calm down. Lovino had yet to be charged with anything, so therefore he had no idea what was going to happen next; it was all contingent on how lenient the judge was at his initial hearing. It was a shame that Lovino wasn't necessarily a people-pleaser — *at all* — but he had to keep his wits about him to try and charm his way out of this ridiculous situation

Without a clock in his little cell, Lovino really had no clue what time it was. He was left counting his heartbeats in order to stay sane. It wasn't really working, but it was better than stewing on his already overwhelmed thoughts.

After several more fruitless minutes — or hours, for all Lovino knew — there was a soft click of a door being unlocked. Lovino looked up and was equal parts relieved and terrified. Relieved because *damn I was ready to scream that was so fucking boring* and terrified because all the time in the world couldn't prepare him for what was next.

Wordlessly, Lovino stood. He was informed that it was time for his initial hearing in front of a judge.

He took in a deep breath.

Here goes nothing.

Lovino exhaled as he was led from his accursed cell to learn his fate.

Antonio stared listlessly, counting the cracks in the ceiling as he sunk deeper into the bed. He was trying to distract himself, with little success. It had already been two days, and he was still hiding out in Gilbert's apartment. The days had bled into each other, Antonio not having the strength nor the will to step foot outside of the small guest room he was being loaned. It was useless, he just couldn't seem to get out of bed anymore.

But that didn't stop Gilbert from trying.

The German had been relentless, checking up on Antonio every couple hours or so. Every time Gilbert had attempted to bribe him out of the room (usually with the promise of food), but Antonio just couldn't. He felt like he had betrayed Lovino by not running as he had been instructed. He had lost Feliciano, and now he couldn't do anything but wallow in self-pity.

Antonio brought a hand up to scrub at his eyes. He knew that Lovino was bound to be released, but the Italian had yet to contact him. He was growing worried, but he could do

little more than sit idly by and wait — something that wasn't exactly good for his mental health.

He had been moody, and distantly he hoped that Gilbert would forgive him for his dreadful attitude. But he couldn't help it, he just wanted everything to go back to the way it was.

Antonio was descending into another bout of self-hatred and condemnation, but he was interrupted by the door being blown wide open:

"Toni, dude, you have got to get yourself together." Gilbert said, glare fixed firmly on his face.

Antonio shook his head, "What's the point?"

"Really?" Gilbert scoffed. "Do I need to remind you that you've got two people depending on you right now? That if you just roll over and die then you're damning Feliciano to his abuser? Do you need me to go on?"

Antonio groaned, flopping over as he brought a pillow up over his face.

"Oh, no you don't." Gilbert growled, grabbing the pillow and removing it from Antonio's grasp.

This wasn't the first time they've had this very conversation, but it always ended up the same: Antonio feeling even more worthless and Gilbert walking away wondering what could get through to the sullen Spaniard.

"Please just leave me alone." Antonio whispered out.

Gilbert put his hands on his hips, "No, you need to get your ass out of bed."

Antonio shook his head, "Why?"

"Do you really need me to go over all the points again?"

"Ugh, what do you want from me?" Antonio asked, feeling annoyance break through his despondency.

Gilbert rolled his eyes, "You can start by getting dressed."

"And why would I do that?" Antonio asked, thinking that this was a new line of dialogue they had yet to explore.

"Because you and I need to run to your apartment." Gilbert said, already throwing a shirt at Antonio's head.

He caught it, looking at it dubiously. Antonio really didn't want to face the emptiness of their little apartment again, "Why do we need to go there?"

“Dude, you need a change of clothes. Seriously, you reek.” Gilbert said, a small smile breaking the glare he had plastered on.

Antonio sighed, “Why can’t I just wash what I’m wearing now?”

“Because I said so!” Gilbert said with a toothy grin.

Antonio glared, “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Don’t care. We’re leaving in five minutes whether you’re dressed or not.” he said with an obnoxious wink.

“Fine, whatever.” Antonio mumbled in annoyance, finally throwing his legs over the bed.

When Gilbert saw Antonio move to get dressed, he turned and left with a satisfied smile.

Antonio felt inclined to yell after him, “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing!”

Gilbert just cackled, “Sure, whatever. Just get dressed!”

With an annoyed huff, Antonio pulled on his clothes. It was obvious that Gilbert was just trying to get him out of the room, and dammit if his little stunt wasn’t working. The truth of the matter was that Antonio was sick of sulking around. He was miserable, and being forced out of the apartment was a small blessing — even if he still had reservations about facing the outside world again.

After the allotted five minutes, Antonio was fully dressed. He cracked the door open and nervously made his way out into the hallway. He was breaking his self-induced isolation for the first time in days, and he felt just a little apprehensive.

But Gilbert was there to meet him with a reassuring smile, “Hey dude, welcome back.”

Antonio shook his head, “Back from what?”

Gilbert laughed, “Back from that depressing fit you were having. Seriously, you were bumming me out.”

“Whatever.” he grumbled, not sure how to respond to the cheeky German.

In no time, they were walking out of the apartment and down the street. Antonio walked in a daze, trying to pinpoint the exact moment that everything had gone wrong in his life.

When I was born, I guess. He laughed wryly at his own joke.

Gilbert looked over at him in concern, not sure if he should address his state of depressive self-derision or not.

They walked on in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. It was an uncharacteristically warm day, and if Antonio hadn't felt so down, he would have turned his face to the sun and soaked in the comforting heat. But the storm cloud that was Antonio wouldn’t allow any of

the sun's bright rays to reach him, instead choosing to freeze under the cool shade of his own mind.

However, the fresh air was doing wonders for his mood, and for the first time Antonio felt that he could at least try to overcome his gloomy attitude. After a few more moments of awkward silence, Antonio finally felt up to talking, surprising Gilbert as he asked, "So, uh, what's your story?"

"Huh?"

Antonio shrugged, looking down. He had been curious about the two brothers and just how they came to be living on their own at such a young age. There was no way that Gilbert was out of his twenties, and, as Cristiano had said, there weren't many Germans living in the area (not that Antonio really knew, but he did find it rather odd).

Gilbert tapped at his chin thoughtfully, "Like, you wanna know how me and my brother ended up living on our own?"

Antonio nodded, still refusing to meet his eyes.

"Well, it's not nearly as interesting as you'd like to think." Gilbert laughed. "I wanted a change of pace, so I decided to move away. My old man was all too happy to see me gone, said I was *too difficult* and an *insufferable trouble-maker*." he said with a fond smile.

"And your brother?" Antonio asked softly.

Gilbert shrugged, "He wanted to *broaden his horizons* or some bullshit. Really, Ludwig is like an old man himself. I think it was because he missed me."

Antonio rolled his eyes. Having lived with the two for a couple days, he could tell that Ludwig was in a constant state of exasperation because of the excitable albino, and that *missing* Gilbert was perhaps the least likely reason the stoic blond had moved, "How long have you guys been here?"

"Well, I've been here for…" he counted on his fingers, "eight years now!"

"That long?" Antonio asked, wondering if Gilbert was older than he gave him credit for.

"Yup! Ludwig only moved in last year, and I can tell that he really likes the city. Actually, I think there's a college around here he's had his eye on…" Gilbert's head shot up like he had just solved some great mystery. Suddenly he was crossing his arms childishly as he said, "Wait, maybe that's why he moved in with me. I should have known, he's just using me!"

Antonio couldn't hold back his laughter at the betrayed look on Gilbert's face, "I'm sure he's not using you."

Gilbert's eyes snapped to Antonio's with a glare, "You don't know him, he's actually quite devious."

Yeah, like I believe that.

Ludwig was probably one of the most strait-laced people Antonio had ever met, and he was willing to bet that Gilbert was the devious one in the relationship. But, as Gilbert had said, he really *didn't* know, so he decided to just let it rest.

"So what about you then?" Gilbert asked, shrugging off the small epiphany he just had.

Antonio shrugged, "What about me?"

Gilbert let out a sudden bark of laughter, "Don't take this the wrong way, man, but how in the hell did you — a Spaniard — end up living with Lovino and Feliciano — both Italians — in a completely foreign country all the way across the ocean at such a young age?"

He thought about how he should answer that. When Gilbert put it like that, it did sound completely ridiculous. The best answer he could really give was a bit of a cop-out, but Antonio didn't have much more of an explanation, "Luck, I guess."

Gilbert just stared at him in disbelief, "Really?"

Antonio shrugged, "Yeah, my family just so happened to move right next door when I was a kid. Everything just kind of spiraled from there, so…"

Spiraled directly into the ground.

While Antonio's life only got more complicated (read: difficult) after he met the two Italians, he didn't blame them for it. After all, it was his choice to abandon his own family in order to follow them. It was also his choice to stay with them after life gave him every incentive to escape this horrible life of hardship. But there was one thing that wasn't his choice, something that he had never counted on:

"I fell in love with him."

"With Lovino?" Gilbert clarified.

Antonio nodded, "I thought it was just a crush, but then I learned he was moving away."

"Let me guess," he said sarcastically, "you couldn't bear for him to leave you behind." Gilbert smirked as he put a hand dramatically over his chest, "Oh, be still my heart!"

"Cliché, isn't it?" Antonio smiled. "We used to hate each other, you know."

Gilbert looked surprised, "Seriously?"

"Yeah, like *really* hated each other. If you haven't noticed, Lovi's a bit, um, *abrasive."* Antonio started fidgeting with his hands, feeling like a shy teenager all over again.

Gilbert scoffed with a roll of his eyes, "Lovino? Definitely not."

"No, really!" Antonio laughed, "We always fought about everything, it didn't matter what about. I thought he was just some stuck-up brat who picked fights on the streets in his free time — it definitely explained the bruises." he suddenly looked down in shame, "But then…"

“It didn’t add up, did it?” Gilbert asked softly.

Antonio shook his head, “No, it didn’t. It should have been obvious, but I didn’t want it to be true.”

Gilbert looked to the sky, sighing as he asked, “What changed your mind?”

“Feli.” he groaned, all his reminiscing bringing him back to the present and the way the past was repeating itself, “He came to me one day and basically begged me to help. Lovi was hurt pretty bad and had passed out. Feli let slip a few details about what had happened, and… I finally connected the dots.”

Antonio glared at the ground, clenching his hands as he willed the guilt away.

God, I was so stupid.

After a few more tense moments of silence, Gilbert clapped a hand on Antonio’s shoulder, “I’m sorry, man.”

It wasn’t an apology for what had happened in the past, but one for the present. Antonio could feel his eyes growing watery as he thought about his failures. He had desperately tried to make it up to Lovino after he learned the truth. Over time, he had gained his trust, and eventually a horrible little emotion called *love* had worked its way into Antonio’s heart. He loved Lovino, wholly and without question, and to have betrayed him with his own cowardly inability to act and prevent what had happened was enough to send Antonio spiraling once more.

He couldn't bear to speak after that, the two having to complete their trek in silence.

They finally made it to the apartment, but all Antonio could feel was dread. After all, he was only going to be met with cool emptiness and that oppressive feeling of loneliness that threatened to swallow him whole.

“C’mon, let’s just get it over with.” Gilbert said when he noticed the way Antonio hesitated in front of the door.

With a sigh, he moved to unlock their apartment. But, to Antonio’s extreme surprise (and mild concern) the door was unlocked, “What the…?” Antonio pushed the door open cautiously, shooting Gilbert a worried look.

He crept in, Gilbert following closely behind, but the apartment was still seemingly abandoned. Antonio tiptoed into the living room, finding no traces of activity. Gilbert had disappeared warily down the hallway, investigating the bedrooms.

Antonio padded into the kitchen, still finding no evidence that something was amiss. He was about to shrug it off as a slip-up on his part — *maybe I forgot to lock the door* — when he heard Gilbert yell:

“Toni, get in here!”

Without another thought, Antonio bolted down the hallway and towards Gilbert’s frantic yell, ending up in his own bedroom.

"What's wrong-"

Antonio froze in disbelief.

What?

He shrieked, "Oh my God!"

Chapter End Notes

Boom, double cliffhanger!

Oof, why did I do this? It's probably a crappy cliffhanger anyway, but dammit they're fun to write!

Lol, sorry. Thanks for reading, had a good time writing this one. Pretty dialogue heavy, hope that's aight. Anyway, I pretty much have the next chapter already written, so it won't be too long!

Alrighty, that's all I can think to say.

Peace out, stay safe.

'Till next time!

Chapter 41

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With an irritated scoff, Lovino kicked at the ground. He had been miraculously released after a hearing that hadn't lasted but *five fucking minutes.*

"You keep me in a fucking cell for two days and that's it?" he scowled, fighting his instinct to scream all his grievances to the sky.

He was met with very little fanfare in a large room with people scattered sporadically around. In the middle of the room sat an older man, a stack of papers spread before him. Lovino saw another person being hurried out of the room as he walked in, so it was likely that these hearings cycled through like clockwork.

The old man, who had unsurprisingly ended up being the judge, read out the charges Lovino was accused of.

"So you're here today on the allegations of misdemeanor forgery and fraud, as well as felony child neglect." said the elderly man, hair long gone white.

Lovino simply gulped and nodded.

The man plowed ahead, "The court has reviewed the accusations and has determined there is probable cause on counts of forgery and fraud."

Again, Lovino nodded, having expected that.

"However, the felony count of child neglect has been ruled as unsubstantiated. Therefore it is the state recommendation to bond."

With a shake of the head, Lovino snapped out of the memory. He had almost fallen over at the relief he felt, but his heart almost stopped completely when he learned how much his bail was set at.

"Just where in the hell am I supposed to find two-thousand goddamn dollars?" Lovino groaned to himself, breaths coming out in little puffs as he kept shooting paranoid glances over his shoulder.

While his bail was set at that ridiculously high amount, he was offered the chance to bond out. Basically, he only had to pay a small portion of his bail on a loan and pay it all back plus interest at a later date. It wasn't ideal, but at least he wasn't in jail.

Still bullshit.

Along with the hefty fine, Lovino also had to appear before the court in a couple weeks to learn just what kind of damage he was in for. He was told that jail time wasn't in the picture,

but whether or not he could afford the fines could affect that.

Despite the fact that the hearing couldn't have gone better, he still felt edgy. He cast his eyes out wildly as he started walking down the sidewalk. He was only a little ways from the jailhouse, but the fact that there were so many cops milling about didn't make him feel any better.

"Where are you, son of a bitch." he mumbled under his breath.

The hearing went well, true, but not all had gone according to plan. No, that would be too easy, and when had anything in Lovino's life been easy? He crossed his arms defensively across his chest, jumping at every shadow.

What had gone so laughably wrong in the hearing was of no fault to Lovino or even the system itself. What was wrong was that, as almost all hearings, this one was a public affair.

How in the hell did he know when this was?

Of course Cristiano would have known, and of course he would have come to keep tabs on him. Distantly Lovino remembered that family members were invited to the hearings to sit in, so logically his father would have been notified. However, that didn't stop Lovino from nearly jumping out of his skin when he noticed the imposing man sitting near the back, a piece of paper clutched tightly in his hand.

With a shudder, Lovino walked on. He didn't like the way Cristiano's eyes had darkened when he was pretty much let off the hook.

Lovino cast a careful eye around him again, but he was still caught by surprise when a voice called out to him, "Oi, get your ass over here."

He felt his back stiffen, turning carefully just to see Cristiano marching determinedly towards him. There was still that mysterious paper held tightly in his hand.

"Stay away from me, bastard." Lovino growled, but was frozen firmly to the spot as his father got close enough to wave the document in his face.

"What the fuck is this?" he snarled.

Lovino tried to see just what was being waved in his face, but he couldn't make it out, "I don't know, maybe if you stop fucking shoving it in my face I could tell you!"

Cristiano huffed, but pulled the document away, "Withdraw it."

Lovino was getting frustrated, "Withdraw what?"

"The dispute! It was delivered to me yesterday, and I'm telling you to withdraw it." he demanded.

When did they file that?

While Lovino didn't remember pushing the case through, he wasn't about to put a stop to it now. He crossed his arms with a satisfied smirk, "Hell no."

Cristiano glowered, leaning forward to tower over his son, "I said *withdraw it. Now."*

Even though Lovino was internally panicking at having this man so close, he managed to shake his head and squeak out a nervous, "No. You can't make me, and you won't try anything. Not with all these cops crawling around."

Cristiano chuckled darkly, "Oh, won't I?"

Without another word, Cristiano shot a hand out to grasp Lovino's arm in a fierce hold. Lovino could do little more than flail his arms out in a desperate attempt to escape, but the grip around his arm was like iron, "Oi, let me go!"

"Not a chance." he growled.

Lovino felt his breathing pick up as he was practically dragged down an empty alleyway. Nevermind the fact that it was broad daylight, the towering buildings that bordered the narrow alley cast dark shadows. It was something out of a movie, and unfortunately such a setting never boded well for the victim.

Shit, shit, shit! What do I do?

He wondered if screaming would help, but the way his labored breathing came out, Lovino wasn't sure if he was physically able to.

As they descended deeper into the alley, and further from help, Cristiano all but threw Lovino into the brick wall. Lovino gasped out as his back slammed into it, hearing a distant ringing as his head smacked against the rough surface.

"Alright," Cristiano said as he pinned the smaller with a hand to his chest, "you are going to drop this case, and then we'll never have to see each other again."

Lovino, despite his vision swimming dangerously, managed a fierce glare, "Fuck you."

Cristiano leaned in disturbingly close, "You wanna try that again?"

Lovino scrunched up his nose in disgust, feeling the hot breath on his face. He continued to glare and, in an act of extreme bravery (or maybe just profound stupidity), Lovino drew his head back and spat in his father's face.

Cristiano recoiled violently, releasing Lovino in the process. He still stood uncomfortably close, but simply brought a hand up to delicately wipe away the saliva, which had begun trailing disgustingly down his cheek.

Against the wall, Lovino was about to descend into a full-blown panic attack. He couldn't believe he had the nerve to do that, his boldness shocking even him.

Oh, shit. Oh, fuck. What the hell was I thinking?

Cristiano was not a patient man, and seeing him act so calmly in the face of blatant defiance was extremely unnerving. However, the uncharacteristic serenity could hardly last. Suddenly, every muscle in Cristiano's face tensed with immeasurable rage as he whipped his arm around into a fierce backhand.

Lovino hardly had time to blink before he felt the hand collide with his face. He was sent sprawling, but he had hardly hit the ground when he was being dragged back up and pushed once again into the wall. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, feeling rather than seeing the way Cristiano scowled down at him, "You don't get to do that to me. Ever."

Lovino nodded swiftly, feeling something warm trail down from his nose and settle in the corner of his mouth. It tasted metallic, but he couldn't bring a hand up to wipe it away because suddenly Cristiano was shaking him roughly by the shoulders, "Look at me."

He peeled his eyes open slowly, finding that his vision was blurry. The place where he had been hit stung, and he could hear his blood rushing in his ears. His head was still throbbing from the initial blow against the wall, but he was able to hold onto consciousness.

They locked eyes, and Lovino was fighting the urge to turn his head away. But, astonishingly, Cristiano's face softened into something decidedly *sympathetic.* He brought a hand up, and Lovino flinched away. Cristiano seemed pleased by the reaction, shocking Lovino further when he lowered it and said mockingly, "Why do you make me do this to you?"

That caused anger to course through Lovino's veins, but he was helpless to do anything but squirm uncomfortably from his position against the wall, "L-leave us alone."

Cristiano ignored him, "Y'know, if you don't withdraw the dispute, then you're really not gonna like what happens next."

He halted his squirming, instead fixing his father with a nervous glare, "What are you talking about?"

"You don't know yet, do you?" Cristiano laughed, pulling away to let Lovino stand on his own shaky legs.

Know what?

Even though he was swaying unsteadily, Lovino had enough energy to grit out, "Stop with all this cryptic bullshit. Just say what you mean!"

"Your brother's been pretty well-behaved lately. Would hate for him to suffer on account of your actions." he said flippantly, like he was discussing the weather.

...what?

It felt as if Lovino had been kicked in the gut as he leaned forward with imploring eyes, "You're lying."

There's just no way.

“Seriously, he’s been really good lately. Quiet as a mouse, obedient. *Dio,* I wish you were more like him.” he said with a wistful sigh.

Lovino felt like a bucket of ice water had just been dumped over him. He didn't want to believe it, “No. There’s no way you could have him.”

You can’t.

Cristiano simply shrugged, “Believe what you will, you’ll find out soon enough. But I would do the right thing here and just drop the case.”

Lovino shook his head desperately, trying to deny what he knew was true. His mind ran through dozens of emotions all at once, each one being displayed clearly on his face. It was a confusing mess of hurt and denial, but in the end he landed on cold, all-consuming rage.

He surged forward, gripping Cristiano’s shoulders tightly. Even Lovino himself wasn’t sure what he was trying to accomplish, but in a fit of white-hot anger he yelled, “You’re a fucking liar, *you piece of shit!* Just go fucking die already, *fuck!”*

Suddenly Lovino felt his wrist captured and twisted painfully to the side. Too late he realized that lashing out was probably *the worst* decision he could have made as a knee was buried cruelly in his gut. As he breathlessly pitched forward, Lovino heard a *crack* when a fist slammed into his ribs.

“What the fuck did I just say?” Cristiano growled.

But Lovino couldn’t reply even if he wanted to. All the air had long rushed out of his lungs as he collapsed on the ground, arms wrapped protectively around his middle. His eyes were once again squeezed shut as he tried desperately to draw in a breath.

Cristiano leaned over him with a disappointed sigh, "Listen, either you drop this case, or the next one to be *pathetically* curled up on the ground will be your dear brother. He seems to be a lot more sensitive than you, wonder if he'll last longer than you did. Get what I'm saying?"

Lovino tried to gasp out a retort, a plea, *something,* but what ended up coming out was a pained groan.

Cristiano shook his head sadly, “You look a little tied up right now, I’ll let you think about what I said.” Lovino cracked an eye open to see his father saunter away, but it seemed Crisitiano had one last thing to say, “Oh, and this never happened. Tell anyone, and it’s your brother who pays.”

Lovino watched from his position on the ground as his tormenter stalked away. He gasped as he gripped at his chest, unable to do much more but twist uncomfortably on the ground.

He felt like he was going to suffocate, from both his bruised (if not broken) ribs and this horrible ultimatum he was just given. He couldn’t drop the case, not if he ever wanted to see Feliciano again. But by not giving in, he was handing his father the chance to hurt his little brother on his behalf. He was well and truly stuck, with no clear way out.

Cristiano continued to walk away, seemingly unconcerned with the fact that Lovino was trying desperately to speak up.

Finally, right before Cristiano had vacated the alley entirely, Lovino was able to gasp out, "Why?"

Why won't you just go away?

He didn't really expect an answer. After all, when Lovino asked before, he was just dismissed. But it seemed that Cristiano was feeling particularly smug, because he stopped and turned, "Why do I need your brother? Oh, he's going to make me rich." And with those final words, he was gone.

What?

That left him with more questions than it answered, but Lovino was, as Cristiano put it, *a little tied up* trying to breathe. He started seeing stars as his vision continued to swim, his surroundings coming in and out. He brought the back of his hand up to wipe away some of the blood that was still running down from his nose, but he ended up just smearing it grotesquely across his face.

"Fuck!" he tried to yell, but it probably came out more as a strangled cry. He could hardly pull in a breath without wincing in pain. His face also felt swollen from where he had been hit, but what hurt the most was the fact that he had been bested.

Lovino shoved the palms of his hands into his eyes, trying to stave off the crying fit he felt coming on. He refused to break down in the middle of a deserted alleyway, he wasn't that pathetic (he had to ignore the voice in his head that reminded him that he had broken down in an alleyway before, and not too terribly long ago).

I need to find out what happened.

At that thought, he started clawing his way to a standing position. He refused to make a decision before he knew the full details of what happened in his absence.

After an embarrassingly long time, he had finally pulled himself completely up. He couldn't help the slight slump in his posture — his ribs still hurt like a bitch — but with a shaky step, he managed to start walking.

It was slow going, each intake of breath was a sharp knife in his chest, and he was sure that the wild look in his eyes had yet to fade completely. His heart was still galloping madly in his chest, all the adrenaline still forcing its way through his veins.

"Fucking asshole, I'll kill him." Lovino muttered, though he didn't know how he would manage to do that.

Motherfucker wiped the floor with me.

He scoffed at his own uselessness during the short encounter. Cristiano had been trying to intimidate him, and unfortunately it had worked. Lovino did feel intimidated, but not because

he was afraid of getting beat up again — he had dealt with it before, he'd live. But the fact that his actions now directly affected the wellbeing of his brother.

"Goddammit!" Lovino shouted, earning a few worried looks from some of the other passersby on the sidewalk. He supposed he looked like some kind of delinquent, what with his hunched manner of walking and blood smeared across his face. Nobody approached him, and after a long and agonizing walk, he finally made it to his apartment.

The climb up the stairs was difficult to say the least, but Lovino simply grit his teeth and endured it. He hobbled awkwardly down the hallway, breathing still rattling uncomfortably, and shoved the key into the lock. When he emerged into the apartment, he was met by cool emptiness.

"Hello?" he wheezed out, feeling just a spark of trepidation in his chest.

He made his way inside and looked around. It was obvious that the apartment had been abandoned for at least a few days, but he trekked further inside just to make sure.

His first destination was Feliciano's room. He knew that he wouldn't find his brother there, but there was still a decent amount of denial lodged firmly in his brain. Honestly, the denial was probably why he hadn't buckled completely under the pressure yet.

Lovino peeked his head nervously into his brother's room, and was disappointed (yet entirely unsurprised) to find it completely vacant. He tried to sigh, but his breath caught painfully in his throat.

Fucking hell, just how hard did he hit me?

With a groan, Lovino lifted his shirt and tried to assess the damage. There were already some ugly bruises forming on his abdomen, and he winced when he poked at the discoloration. Luckily, he didn't think anything was broken, but that didn't stop the slight stumble in his step as a sharp pain shot through his frame.

Distantly Lovino realized that the adrenaline was finally wearing off, and he had maybe a minute or so before he collapsed. Therefore, to avoid another unfortunate run-in with the ground that day, he ambled sluggishly to his own room and collapsed on the bed.

He instinctively curled up, doing his best to ignore the physical and mental anguish he was feeling. It seemed that he had finally lost everything, this ultimatum sealing the deal. He wasn't sure what he was going to do, but he didn't have time to stew on it further because he was slowly losing consciousness.

Lovino was helpless to put a stop to the wayward tears that rolled lazily down his cheeks as his vision continued to fade. He didn't know what the right decision was, if there *was* a right decision. He needed to talk this out, to confide in someone, but it seemed he was all alone.

Where the hell is Antonio?

While Lovino wouldn't bring what happened up to someone like Tino (the feisty lawyer would probably try to use this), he felt safe sharing with Antonio. The two shared (almost) everything, and this was too important to keep to himself. Lovino had learned his lesson the hard way about keeping secrets.

With another pained sigh, Lovino shut his eyes and tried to will away the world. He didn't want to be the one to have to shoulder this terrible burden, to make a decision on this. As childish as it sounded, Lovino desperately wanted an adult.

"It's all your fault, you fucking traitor. Why'd you have to go and die?" Lovino whispered out, finally drifting away completely. It wasn't fair, although life seldom was.

His last thoughts were of his brother, and his grandfather, and of the life that they had had and had lost as that blissful blanket of unconsciousness finally swallowed him whole.

The sound of footsteps is what woke Lovino up, though he was too sore to really move. He decided to keep his eyes shut as he heard muffled voices speaking. He couldn't make out what was being said, but there was a nervous edge to both voices.

The footsteps were getting closer, but Lovino still had yet to open his eyes. But when he heard a sharp intake of breath, he knew he was going to have to wake up and face the world.

"Shit, dude! Are you alright?" came a distinctly German accent.

Lovino just groaned nebulously, deciding not to give a real answer.

"Okay, um… wait a sec." the voice drifted further away before it all but yelled, "Toni, get in here!"

Another pair of footsteps thundered towards the room, "What's wrong-"

A pause.

"Oh my God!"

Lovino cringed at the volume, finally opening his eyes just in time to see Antonio rushing towards him, "Lovi, you're back! Oh *Dios,* are you alright? Sorry, stupid question. What happened?"

What happened?

It took Lovino a few seconds of blank staring before everything came rushing back to him. When it did, he shot straight up, nearly headbutting Antonio in the process, "Oh shit!"

"Lovi?" Antonio asked, eyes starting to water as he took in his less-than-okay appearance.

Lovino groaned in pain at the sudden movement, nearly collapsing as he brought an arm around his middle. He swept the room with his eyes, trying to process his surroundings. He was in his bedroom, right he remembered stumbling in there. His ribs hurt like a bitch,

bruised from his little encounter on the streets. And there was something that was uncomfortably crusty on his face — that's right, a bloody nose from being hit.

Dammit, I probably look like a disaster.

He brought a hand up to rub away the dried blood, "I'm fine."

Antonio disagreed with a scoff, "No, you're not! You need to lay down"

He tried to push Lovino gently down, but the Italian was having none of it, "Ay, knock it off, bastard! I look worse than I am, seriously."

"Are you sure?" Antonio asked, still fussing over him.

"Yes! Now, back off." Lovino nearly growled, his skin crawling from the contact. He didn't know why the encounter with his father had made him so edgy, but what he needed more than anything right then was space.

Antonio acquiesced, looking a little sheepish, "I'm sorry."

Lovino sighed heavily, "It's okay. Just… just give me a few minutes."

He was met by silence, and Lovino was grateful for it. His mind was racing about a million miles a minute as he tried to figure out his next course of action. First thing's first, he should probably tell Antonio what had happened — he deserved an explanation at the very least.

With a sigh, Lovino looked up. He was about to speak when he noticed the other inhabitant of the room standing there. Lovino jumped, "What the-? When did you get here?"

Gilbert jumped a little too at being addressed so suddenly, "Me?"

Lovino rolled his eyes, "Yes, you. Idiot."

"Uh, been here the whole time, dude. Didn't you notice?" Gilbert said, leaning against the doorframe.

"No…" Lovino trailed off, irritated with himself for missing perhaps the most noticeable person in the *whole damn world.*

Shit, I must be more out of it than I thought.

Apparently Lovino's dazed state made Antonio worry too, because he was suddenly leaning over him again, "Are you sure you're alright?"

"Fucking-fantastic." Lovino said, edging away as the Spaniard tried to inch closer. But Antonio didn't get the obvious hint that Lovino *did not* want to be touched right then, because he continued approaching.

"Wait, Antonio, don't-" Lovino warned when Antonio brought up a hand, probably in an attempt to caress his no-doubt swollen face. However, the moment he got within a few

inches, Lovino jerked violently away.

They both froze.

Lovino looked away in shame, unable to stop the reaction. Antonio just looked horrified, "Lovi?"

"S-sorry." Lovino grit out, his breaths coming out in little puffs.

What the fuck was that?

He was horrified at the reaction, and more than a little embarrassed. Not only that, but it seemed to just upset Antonio further. Damn, that was the last thing he wanted right then.

"Toni, I'm fine. Seriously." Lovino said in a desperate attempt to come across as normal.

He should have known it wouldn't work, "Stop saying that! Something obviously happened, please just talk to me!" Antonio said, leaning forward as he begged with watery eyes.

Lovino had to look away, feeling guilt claw at his chest. He cast his eyes around the room, anywhere but the pleading Spaniard. He noticed that Gilbert must have left the room out of respect, the albino no longer at his post against the doorframe.

He sighed, reaching a shaky hand to grab Antonio's, "I promise, I'll explain everything. But first, I need to know something."

Antonio smiled sadly at their linked hands, finally sitting down fully on the bed, "What is it?"

Lovino's breath hitched uncomfortably as his ribs throbbed once more. He didn't want to ask, but he needed to know, "What happened to my brother?"

The grip on his hand suddenly tightened, and Antonio's eyes had blown wide open. He was breathing hard, tears already gathering at the corner of his eyes, "I'm so sorry."

Lovino closed his eyes in resignation, "Just… what happened?"

Antonio groaned, "He ran."

Lovino nodded sadly. Of course his brother had run, it was what he was best at. It wasn't hard to believe — Feliciano had probably blamed himself and decided to end the situation on his terms. It hurt, but it wasn't surprising, "Figures."

Antonio laughed humorlessly, leaning back on the headboard, feet kicked out to rest next to Lovino's. The silence enveloped them, each lost in their own thoughts. Lovino could feel the heat radiating off the Spaniard, scooting closer until their shoulders pushed together. Antonio couldn't stop the small smile as he whispered, "I missed you, Lovi."

Lovino could do little more than nod in agreement. Slowly, he turned on his side to rest his head on Antonio's shoulder. The physical contact still made him just a tad uncomfortable, but

he was willing to put it aside. He still needed to tell Antonio what had happened, but he was quickly losing the motivation.

There's no point, is there? It's over.

That was the conclusion Lovino had finally landed on. He could spend all the time in the world agonizing over this ultimatum, but he knew what conclusion he was going to land on. Feliciano had made his decision, it was the least Lovino could do to respect it.

"Hey Toni?" Lovino said in a small voice.

Antonio looked down at him the best he could, not daring to move lest he trigger another reaction, "Yes?"

Lovino brought in a shaky breath, not having the heart to look his boyfriend in the eyes. He gripped his hand tighter, very nearly unable to talk around the giant lump that had formed in his throat, "I'm sorry."

"What's wrong?" Antonio asked in concern, sitting up a bit more to try and meet his eyes.

Lovino still refused, "I'm sorry, but…" he squeezed his eyes shut, unable to even cry as he stood firm in his decision, "I want to drop the case."

Chapter End Notes

:)

Op, sorry y'all you hate to see it.

Pls don't kill me.

As always, thanks for reading love you all. Drop a comment if ya feel like it, though I'm prepared for the anger already.

Also, tags updated :)

Okie, bye!

'Till next time!

Chapter 42

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Gilbert was grumbling quietly to himself as he jammed his key into the lock of his door. His eyes were glazed over in some unknown emotion as he fought to keep his breathing even. Even the way he walked seemed just a little too aggressive, a little too forceful. He was fighting to keep calm, but every tremor that ran through his hands, every shaky intake of breath betrayed the fact that Gilbert. Was. *Pissed.*

To say he disagreed with Lovino's decision to drop the case was a substantial understatement. Gilbert had been ready to fight the obstinate Italian on the issue, unable to believe he had just given up, but a teary-eyed Antonio had ushered him out the door with the parting words of, *"Let me talk to him."*

"You better be ready for a fucking fight, Toni. Lovino is one stubborn motherfucker." Gilbert scoffed as he finally turned the key to his apartment. In a fit of anger, he whipped the door open with a lot more force than necessary, kicking off his shoes before slamming it shut with a resounding *bang.*

Ludwig jumped from his spot on the couch, "Gil? What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Everything!" Gilbert yelled, his thoughts a whirlwind of anger and hopelessness. He felt like screaming, more pissed than he could remember being for a long time, "What the fuck is wrong with him? Does he not know what he's doing?"

"Who?" was the exasperated response.

"Lovino!" Gilbert threw his arms in the air, "He's about to throw everything away!"

"What do you mean by that?" Ludwig asked with just a hint of trepidation.

"I mean that Lovino gave up. He wants to drop the case, fucking bullshit I swear to God. " Gilbert stomped into the kitchen, fumbling with his phone.

Ludwig stood in shock, "Wait, he's *what now?"*

"You fucking heard me." Gilbert grumbled, pulling up the contact of the only person that could possibly help at this point.

"So it's over?" Ludwig asked with wide eyes.

"Not if I have anything to do with it." Just as Gilbert was about to hit call, he thought of something, rounding on his brother as he asked, "Did you see Feliciano at school today?"

Ludwig looked like a deer caught in the headlights, though he had no reason to look so nervous. Gilbert wondered just how angry he looked to put that expression on his brother's

usually immovable face.

At his imploring glare, Ludwig was finally able to get out a simple, “No, I didn’t.”

At those words, Gilbert aggressively hit the ‘call’ button. The fact that Feliciano wasn’t at school only fed his desperation to take control of the situation while he still could. He started pacing in the kitchen while Ludwig just looked on in astonishment and no small amount of concern.

The phone started to ring, and Gilbert was growing impatient. He couldn’t believe that Lovino of all people would just give up. After everything they had done to stop this outcome, and he was just going to roll over and die?

Does he not realize what he’s doing? What kind of life his brother is going to live?

But that was the problem: Lovino did understand because he had lived it. That’s what was so confusing. The fierce protectiveness that Lovino had exhibited was seemingly gone, disappeared just like his will to fight.

“Goddammit.” Gilbert mumbled under his breath, continuing his pacing as he waited for his call to be picked up.

Finally, an answer, “Hello?”

“Tino! Look, whatever he says, *do not drop the fucking case.”* Gilbert growled.

“Gilbert? What’s wrong?” Tino asked in shock.

Gilbert huffed, “Lovino is going to try and drop the case, and I’m telling you to not let him.”

There was silence on the other end of the line, the small lawyer most likely trying to make sense of what he was told. He was finally able to squeak out a shocked, “Wait, he’s dropping the case?”

Gilbert rolled his eyes, “No, he’s *trying* to drop the case, but you’re not going to let him.”

“That’s not how it works.” Tino sighed.

“So?”

“Okay, okay. Before you start yelling again, please tell me what happened.” Tino said, and Gilbert could just picture the roll of the eyes that accompanied the plea.

“I don’t know, but Lovino came home all beat up and all of a sudden wants to give up, so it’s probably something illegal by that asshole he calls a father.” Gilbert growled, finding no other way to rationalize Lovino’s dramatic change of heart.

“And I’m guessing this is all just speculation on your end?” Tino asked with a huff of frustration.

Gilbert shrugged to himself, “You know I’m right, I mean you’ve met Lovino. There’s no way he would give up so easily, I bet he was told something he didn’t like.”

Tino hummed in thought, “Are you suggesting blackmail?”

“Yes, that!” Gilbert said with satisfaction, “Now, when he calls you saying he wants to drop the case, you’re going to say-”

“-okay.”

Gilbert recoiled, “I’m sorry, you’re going to say *what?”*

“If Lovino wants to drop the case, there’s nothing I can do.” Tino said with some difficulty.

“What do you mean there’s nothing you can do? You’re the one that has control of this situation, so just tell him to fuck off and we can have Feli back by Christmas.” Gilbert scoffed, waving his arm around wildly.

Tino tried to reason with him, “Gil, you and I both know that everybody needs to be on the same page in order to win a custody battle. If Lovino gave up, then there is *literally* nothing I can do.”

“So now you’re giving up too?” Gilbert shouted, feeling betrayed.

“No, I’m just not avoiding the reality of the situation. You can’t win a case if there’s nobody to pursue it.”

“Then I’ll pursue it!” Gilbert yelled.

There was a gasp of surprise coming from the living room, and Gilbert suddenly remembered that his brother was still standing there. But he couldn’t turn to acknowledge Ludwig because he was too busy trying to pull in calming breaths, chest still heaving in anger. He wasn’t sure if he meant to blurt that out, but now that he said it he wasn’t going back on it.

Over the phone, he could hear Tino sigh wearily, “You really care about this one, don’t you?”

“Of course I care.” Gilbert grumbled.

How could he not? He had been pulled into this situation the minute he stepped in to protect Lovino that night at the bar. Although he never could have known the extent to which this would all spiral, Gilbert felt a profound sense of responsibility for how all this turned out.

Tino was silent for a few seconds before saying delicately, “While I would love to see you pick this case up, we both know that it’s not possible. You’d lose. Badly.”

Gilbert deflated at that, his shoulders falling heavily when he realized that Tino was right. It wasn’t realistic, but he was desperate for something, anything that could keep this case alive. He didn’t know what to do, and he was praying Tino had some kind of solution.

With a defeated huff, Gilbert whispered, “Please, just do anything.”

The silence stretched out for much longer this time around, neither party knowing exactly what to say. Distantly, Gilbert realized that Tino was right, that there was nothing they could do. Gilbert was preparing for the inevitable letdown when a voice suddenly piped up:

“Fine.”

Gilbert jumped in surprise, “Wait, what?”

“I said *fine.”* Tino said unhappily, “I don’t know what the legality is here, but I guess if I need to *step out of the office* for a while, then so be it.”

Gilbert’s eyes blew open in shock, not believing what he was being told, “What do you mean?”

Tino sighed, though he didn’t sound as remorseful as one might expect a lawyer would when asked to break the law, “Look, the case is already pending and Lovino’s really the only one who can stop that. But he would need to get into contact with his lawyer to do that, and seeing as his lawyer isn’t taking calls right now…”

Gilbert laughed loudly, perking up from his slumped position as he exclaimed excitedly, “Tino, you sneaky motherfucker.”

“But,” Tino cut off his laughter, “I can’t ignore him forever. You’re going to have to convince him to fight this, I can only stall.”

“Ja, definitely. I’ll light a fire under his ass, don’t even worry about it.” Gilbert nodded vehemently.

There were a few beats of thoughtful silence before Tino said, “Just to be clear, I’m not doing this for you. This case isn’t getting away from me that easily.”

“Aww, that’s alright, you don’t have to admit that you like me, I already know you do.” if Gilbert had been in Tino’s office with him, he would have characterised the statement with an obnoxious wink.

Tino chuckled lightly, “Sure, keep telling yourself that. But for real,” his voice took on that serious tone once more, “I’m going to need your help if we’re going to win this without Lovino’s cooperation”

“Whatever you need.” Gilbert said earnestly.

“Good, then you need to start by doing some research.” Tino said, the rustling of what sounded like a pile of documents accompanied his words.

“What about?” he asked curiously.

Tino seemed distracted by something, “Well, I think I might have found out something interesting. Did you know their grandfather was a successful businessman before he passed?”

Gilbert hummed in thought, “Yeah, I think that was mentioned.”

“No, I mean like *really* successful.” Tino said seriously.

“That’s… cool?” Gilbert said, not sure what Tino was getting at.

The lawyer sighed exasperatedly, “You don’t find it weird that someone as insanely rich as him wouldn’t leave something behind for his grandsons?”

Gilbert quirked up one of his eyebrows, his interest piqued. Now that Tino mentioned it, it did seem strange. Their grandfather — *Roma, right?* — took care of his grandsons for years, and Feliciano had spoken very fondly of him. Someone that successful would have left a will, and it begged the question of what happened to his wealth after he died.

“You think that whatever’s going on revolves around their grandfather.” Gilbert realized.

Tino hummed in approval, “Exactly, but that’s where I need you to come in.”

“Just say the word, man.” Gilbert nodded.

“I need you to find out if Lovino and Feliciano have any living relatives besides their father. Do we know where their mother is?” Tino asked.

Gilbert shook his head, “No idea. I’m not sure if they even know where she is.”

“I’ve been unable to find her either, but maybe you’ll have more luck.” Tino said with a little huff.

“Totally, I’ll see what I can do.” Gilbert said, relieved that he had a task that could actually help.

“Perfect, let me know what you find. Oh, and you know how they refer to their grandfather as Roma?” Tino asked.

“Yeah.” Gilbert said with a nod.

“That’s not his name.” Tino said shortly, “His real name is Romulus Vargas. That might help you a bit in your search.”

So that’s where Lovino got that. Gilbert thought to himself, remembering the night he confessed to changing their names.

“Okay, got it. I’ll get right on it!” he said with determination.

Tino laughed, “I know you will. I'm going to dig around a little more, see what I can find.”

"Hell, yeah. Best lawyer in the world!" Gilbert cheered.

"Don't forget it." Tino mumbled.

Gilbert smiled to himself, beyond appreciative of all the hard work Tino was putting in. Even if they were just prolonging the inevitable defeat, at least they would go down kicking and

screaming. Or, at the very least, Gilbert would, Lovino was still a bit of a wild card.

He ended the call shortly thereafter, resolving himself to think of a way to express his gratitude to Tino when all of this was over — for better or for worse.

“So,” Ludwig cleared his throat, “what’s going on, now?”

Gilbert jumped, completely forgetting about his brother, “Ah, shit! How long have you been standing there?”

“The whole time. Now, what’s happening?” Ludwig asked with a roll of his eyes.

Gilbert shrugged, “Things just got a whole lot more interesting. Also, you think you could convince Feliciano to come over sometime soon?”

Ludwig looked down, perplexed, “I don’t know. I haven’t seen him since he left, and he’ll probably refuse even if I do see him.”

“When you see him.” Gilbert reminded, “And I doubt he’ll be allowed out of his father’s sight, but we still need to try.”

“Why?” Ludwig asked curiously.

“Because he could help dig up some information for us. Besides...” Gilbert said nervously, bringing himself down from his momentary excitement, “I want to make sure he’s okay.”

Ludwig nodded solemnly, “Me too.”

Gilbert ran a hand through his hair, some of his previous energy forgotten. The amount of gravity surrounding the situation was finally hitting home. Gilbert was fearful that Feliciano would try to isolate himself, meaning that Ludwig wouldn’t be very useful in keeping tabs on him. In a split second, he made a decision.

“I’m going out.” Gilbert announced suddenly as he shot out a quick text.

Ludwig scoffed, but looked unsurprised, “It’s like five o’clock, where would you go out right now?”

“It’s never too early to go out, you just have to know where to go.” Gilbert said with a cheeky wink. “And for your information, I’m going out for coffee.”

“Whatever.” Ludwig huffed, obviously not buying it.

Gilbert was just a little offended that his brother thought he would go get shitfaced at five in the afternoon — *I’m not a teenager anymore, jeez* — but he let it go with a dismissive wave.

His phone suddenly lit up, and Gilbert looked down with satisfaction, “Alright, I gotta go.”

Ludwig watched as Gilbert struggled to pull his shoes on, his face an odd mix of concern and annoyance, “Please, no property damage this time.”

“That was *one time!”* Gilbert shrieked as he grabbed his jacket, “And I’m telling you, I’m going to get *coffee.”*

“I’m not coming to get you tonight, I have homework.” Ludwig said as he crossed his arms.

Gott, does he seriously think I’m an alcoholic? But one look at his brother’s deathly serious face indicated that, *yes* he probably did.

Gilbert glared, “I’ll be home before seven, text me if you need anything.”

“I should be the one to say that.” Ludwig mumbled under his breath, though a small smirk broke through his disappointed expression and Gilbert realized that he was being messed with.

“Whatever,” Gilbert said in a huff, “I’ll see you later.”

He breezed out of the apartment, leaving an amused Ludwig in his wake.

Gilbert sat at a table in a small café, foot bouncing nervously on the ground. He already had a cup of coffee in front of him, chin resting comfortably in his hand as he waited.

What the fuck is the holdup?

He sighed heavily, looking around the small café out of sheer boredom. It was, in a word, quaint. The building itself was new, but the interior was made to look purposefully old, *rustic.* The walls were a warm cream color and the few inhabitants inside wore serene expressions on their faces. If Gilbert weren’t so high-strung, he supposed he would have found the environment relaxing as well.

“Ugh, hurry the fuck up.” he mumbled under his breath, glancing up at the clock. It was already thirty minutes past the set meeting time. Gilbert knew that this was last minute, but he still expected punctuality.

Finally, a familiar figure waltzed into the café with an irritating flourish. It was over the top, and completely unnecessary. Of course, that was the whole point, but Gilbert still glared as the man approached him, “You’re late.”

“Fashionably late, *mon ami.”* intoned a french accent, “You understand, I have a reputation to uphold.”

Gilbert snorted, “Yeah, a reputation of being a jackass. Do you treat all your dates like this, or is it just me?”

Francis stood before him, a smirk on his face as he said, “I wasn’t aware this was a date.” that smirk turned teasing as he raked his eyes over Gilbert’s frame, “Might I expect a little dessert tonight, or should I buy you dinner first?”

Gilbert rolled his eyes as he stood, completely unphased by the borderline lewd comment, “You’re a real piece of work, you know that Francis?”

“But of course,” Francis smiled as he brought Gilbert in for a swift hug, “I didn’t get where I am by being easy.”

“Yeah, whatever Frenchie.” Gilbert said, but hugged back.

Francis pulled away with a bright smile, “It’s good to see you again, it’s been too long.”

Gilbert looked away guiltily at that, “Yeah, sorry. I’ve been meaning to call you.”

“Well, obviously. I am irresistible, after all.” Francis sat down with a flip of his hair.

“Mm-hm, yeah.” Gilbert said sarcastically although he couldn’t deny the smile on his face. He felt just a bit guilty at neglecting his friendship with the flamboyant frenchman.

“So, what has you so *desperately* begging for my assistance?” Francis asked dramatically.

Gilbert scrunched his nose up at the phrasing, “I didn’t beg for anything, I just need to call in a favor.”

“But of course!” Francis exclaimed, “Whatever you need, I am yours to command.” he characterised the statement with a suggestive wink.

Gilbert groaned in annoyance, “Can we not have *a single conversation* without your libido getting in the way?”

Francis recoiled with an offended hand over his chest, “The only thing in the way is that horrible attitude. Honestly, it is no wonder you are single.” He began shaking his head in mock disappointment before his eyes suddenly lit up in thought, “Unless you would like-”

“Nope. No way, knock it off.” Gilbert huffed, a little irritated that his love life (or lack thereof) was being mocked, *yet again,* by the obnoxious Frenchman.

Francis pouted, “Oh come on, it’s not like we haven’t done it before. Do you still remember when-”

“Ah!” Gilbert cut him off, cheeks red, “No, we are not going there.”

“Pity.” Francis said with a shrug, “Now, what is this favor you need to ask of me?”

Gilbert glared lightly, though there was no real heat behind it, “You’re still an art teacher, right?”

Francis hummed his assent, his curiosity piqued.

“Are you familiar with a student named Feliciano Vargas?” Gilbert asked tiredly, foot bouncing once more.

Francis’ eyes lit up, “Yes, he is one of my students, a very talented artist. What about him?”

Gilbert brought his eyes down to stare thoughtfully at the table. He wasn't sure how to bring this up delicately so as to not completely betray what little privacy Feliciano still had in his life. He started drumming his fingers on the table nervously, the gentle thump causing the silverware to rattle on the table.

Francis looked at him worriedly before moving his hand to rest on top of Gilbert's, effectively putting an end to the incessant tapping, "What's wrong, *mon cher?* It is not like you to be so down."

Gilbert looked at the hand resting on his, for the first time feeling no ulterior motive behind the act. It felt genuine, comforting, and he felt just a bit of reassurance at the action, "I need you to keep an eye on him."

"Does this have something to do with your job?" Francis asked in concern.

"No… well, kind of." Gilbert extracted his hand from the loose grip, instead running it through his hair, "I just need you to watch him, let me know if you notice anything."

Francis nodded seriously, "Of course, but just what sort of things do you think I'll notice?"

Gilbert sighed, "Anything out of the ordinary. Like any unexplained bruises or if he tries to isolate himself. Hell, even if he looks tired, tell me."

"It sounds like you are looking for evidence of something." Francis said, observing Gilbert from the corner of his eye.

Should have known I couldn't get anything by him.

With a little huff of annoyance, Gilbert said, "Alright, fine. Yes, I'm looking for evidence to use in an upcoming court case. I need you to document what you see so I can use it, now will you help or not?"

Francis' eyes blew open, probably not expecting the German to so blatantly spell everything out for him. But the momentary look of shock was forgotten as his face melted into one of sympathy, "Naturally, I will do all I can."

"Awesome." Gilbert breathed out in relief, "Also, if you could try to *subtly* find out what his home life is like, that would be appreciated too."

Francis scoffed, "Are you saying that I cannot be subtle?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Gilbert said as he crossed his arms.

"Well I'll have you know that I am an *artiste.* Unlike you and your brutish ways, I know how to handle things with a careful amount of finesse and elegance." Francis said as he gesticulated loosely with his hands.

Gilbert rolled his eyes, "Is that how you were able to *elegantly finesse* your way into a restraining order?"

“Ah, Arthur is such a difficult one.” Francis said wistfully, “But for your information, there was no restraining order. Just the threat of one.”

“Yeah, whatever Frenchie. Just don’t let Feli know you’re onto him.” Gilbert said in exasperation.

“Never,” Francis said theatrically, although there was an undertone of earnestness that indicated that he was being deathly serious.

“Good, now are you going to order anything or not?” Gilbert asked, gesturing to the counter where a barista stood ready to take orders.

“How about this,” Francis said, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, “I treat you to a drink or two at the bar down the road, just something to take the edge off.”

It was tempting, Gilbert couldn’t deny. The stress of everything was starting to get to him, the proof exhibited through the fact that he wasn’t acting nearly as playful as he usually did when around Francis. But his short conversation with Ludwig came back to him, the implication that he was some kind of alcoholic sitting heavily in his mind.

But free drinks…

Gilbert glanced at the clock. It was now six in the afternoon — a more acceptable time to get drunk than five o’clock for sure. With a sigh, he glared at his so-called friend, “No property damage this time.”

Francis smirked, “For you, *moni ami,* anything.”

Chapter End Notes

Well golly gee, this took me longer to write than expected. Sorry, but I work at a grocery store and have been working overtime lately because of all the madness - a bunch of my coworkers have been quarantined, so here I am again telling y'all to stay safe pls.

Anywho, thanks for reading! Two things: Tino is best lawyer, and holy fuck Francis is fun to write. Seriously, why haven't I given him more dialogue yet?

Hope you liked him, and I'm excited to officially bring him into the cast. Let me know if you liked this one, 'cause I had fun writing it lol.

Translations:
mon ami - my friend
mon cher - my dear

Okay that's it. Love you all, have a good Easter if you celebrate it, or a good Sunday if you don't!

'Till next time!

Chapter 43

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano stood motionlessly inside his room, blank gaze fixed on the closed door before him. He had spent most of the night restlessly tossing and turning, and had even gotten up to pace with the fleeting hope that his body would succumb to exhaustion. It never did, and as he had blearily prepared for the day, he tried not to think about the dread of going back to school.

Somewhere in his mind he had gotten the idea that he would be kept hidden away as soon as he had given himself up, but for whatever reason Cristiano had insisted that he carry on his life as normal. Feliciano wasn't sure if that meant he could keep his job at the library, but he certainly hoped so — he needed every excuse he could get to be out of the house.

He shifted nervously from foot to foot in an attempt to spur his body into action. It wasn't working, but at least he hadn't shut down yet. It had been uneasy in the household, though Feliciano suspected that he was the only one who felt the horrible tension. It was Wednesday, marking the fourth day since he had purposely sabotaged his own life in a (probably poorly thought-out) plan to make everything *stop*.

But the thing was, nothing had stopped. Feliciano didn't know why that surprised him — maybe it was that lingering sense of naivety or the fact that he wasn't in a great state of mind — but somewhere in his head he had gotten the idea that this whole sort-of conflict between his brother and father would be instantly resolved.

Unfortunately life wasn't as black and white as he had mistakenly believed.

Feliciano bit at his lip nervously as he willed himself to exit the room. He brought a hand up to absentmindedly rub his wrist. It was bruised, the unfortunate aftermath of being roughly grabbed when Cristiano decided that he wasn't moving fast enough.

Feliciano shuddered at the thought of facing his father again, knowing he would inevitably cross paths with the man at some point that day.

Cristiano had been particularly irritable lately, constantly cursing under his breath about anything and everything. It had started when he came home with some sort of document crinkled angrily in his hand, and days later he was still in a sour mood. He always seemed to be on the phone with what sounded like a lawyer, and each time he ended the call with an angry huff.

Feliciano had been careful to stay hidden away, but that just wasn't feasible given the fact that neither of them really left the house. Besides his wrist, a rather forceful shove into the wall had left a dark bruise on his hip. So far, that was it, and he supposed he could count himself lucky for that.

With a sigh, Feliciano came to the realization that he was stalling. This was going to be his first day back to school since the wild turn of events over the weekend and he wasn't sure how he was going to face the outside world again.

Guess I'm about to find out.

With one more shuddering breath, Feliciano stepped forward and pulled the door open. He did so quickly, not giving himself the chance to overthink it before he was peering down an empty hallway. He took a tentative step forward, and it wasn't long before he was creeping his way towards the front door.

He marvelled at his progress, which had remained miraculously unhindered. If he could only slip out of the house and walk to school before his father woke up…

"What do you think you're doing?"

Feliciano jumped, whipping around to face his father. The voice had come from directly behind him, and he thought that his heart might give out at the surprise, "I-I just… um, s-school?"

Cristiano rolled his eyes, pushing roughly past him before he turned into the kitchen, "We're leaving in five minutes."

"W-what?" Feliciano squeaked.

But he wasn't heard, his father already fiddling with something in the kitchen. Feliciano tugged nervously at the sleeves of his shirt, both of which coming clear down over his hands. He had been provided a few changes of clothes since he had left all his things with his brother and Antonio. He practically swam in everything he was given, probably a result of his poor eating habits — or more accurately, lack of any eating habits.

The stress of living with his father again had done strange things to his stomach, and he was falling back on old habits. Unfortunately that included his aversion to food, and as he made his way into the kitchen after his father, he couldn't help but scrunch his nose up when the smell of something cooking invaded his senses.

Cristiano was munching on a piece of toast, paying no mind to Feliciano when he stepped nervously into the kitchen. A pan still sizzled on the stove, although there was no evidence of what had been cooking.

There was a tense silence that descended over the two inhabitants. Feliciano was sure that his father knew he was there, but he simply kept his back turned, outright refusing to acknowledge his son's presence.

The awkwardness would have probably continued indefinitely had not the blaring sound of a phone broken through the fragile peace in the small kitchen. Cristiano grumbled as he dug the device from his pocket, answering with a sharp, "What?"

Feliciano inched his way further into the kitchen, taking a seat at the table. He tried to listen in on the conversation, but his father didn't offer much beyond a few grunts or hums in response to the person on the other line. However, the way the grip on the phone tightened and the ever-darkening expression that marred Cristiano's face indicated that he was *not* pleased about something.

With an angry growl, he hung up. Cristiano whipped around to face his son with a fierce glare, "Your brother just doesn't know when to fucking quit."

Feliciano felt cold at the words, although he wasn't exactly sure what that meant, "Lovi?"

"Yes, *Lovi."* Cristiano said mockingly as he rolled his eyes. "He clearly doesn't give a shit about what happens to you."

That was a lie if Feliciano had ever heard one, though he was curious as to what Lovino had done to provoke their father. Not that he was going to ask — he knew better than to stir the pot when Cristiano himself was a pressure cooker waiting to explode.

"Fucking good-for-nothing lawyer, what the hell am I even paying him for?" Cristiano was back to grumbling to himself, slamming his phone back down on the countertop with a *crack.*

Feliciano's body jerked at the sudden nose, shoulders jumping up to his ears as he tucked his head down towards his chest.

"You're damn lucky you have school today." Cristiano grumbled darkly.

"Am I?" Feliciano said unintentionally under his breath, still dreading his unavoidable return to society.

Cristiano rounded on him, suddenly standing right in front of him, "What was that?"

Feliciano's head shot up, "N-nothing!"

"You better hope it was nothing, you ungrateful little shit." Cristiano emphasised with a harsh jab in the smaller's chest. "Thanks to your brother we're both stuck here, and I won't be putting up with any kind of attitude, got it?"

"Y-yes!" Feliciano exclaimed, vehemently nodding his head.

"And that stuttering thing you're doing?" Cristiano glared as he crossed his arms in annoyance, "Knock it off."

"O-oh, uh, s-sorry." Feliciano tried, and failed, to say smoothly.

Cristiano glared, "Why do I even bother?" He turned to stalk away, finally exiting the kichen as he called callously over his shoulder, "You're fucking worthless."

Feliciano's breath caught at the words, though he had heard them many times before. The constant insults and little jabs that had been thrown at him these past couple of days were really starting to get to him. It hurt, but there was quite literally nothing he could do about it.

With a little sniffle, he scrambled to catch up with Cristiano, quickly pulling on his shoes just in time for his father to whip the door open and make his way outside.

In the driveway sat a white car, unblemished save a dark scuff and a dent on the back bumper. Cristiano wordlessly got in, already starting it while Feliciano rushed to get in the passenger side.

They pulled out of the driveway, Cristiano speeding just a little too quickly through the neighborhood. Feliciano wondered why his father would be giving him a ride when he could walk there just fine — it wasn't like him to be so courteous.

Unless he doesn't trust me.

That made a lot more sense. Feliciano supposed that there was very little stopping him from just running back to his brother. Actually, he thought it was out of character for his father to give him even this much freedom, even if he had to go to school by law. Feliciano didn't trust it for an instant, and even as he kept his gaze fixed firmly on the passing scenery, he hoped for some kind of explanation.

The drive couldn't have been more than ten minutes, although every single second felt like an eternity. The air was heavy in the small car, and Feliciano couldn't help the heavy sigh of relief when they pulled up to the school.

"I'll be here when you're done, don't make me wait." Cristiano said shortly when he stopped the car along the curb.

Feliciano nodded his head, pushing open the door as he tried to scurry away.

"Ah, wait." Cristiano said, freezing the teen in his tracks, "I don't think I need to tell you to keep your mouth shut, right?"

Once again, Feliciano was nodding his assent. What exactly Cristiano was referring to wasn't said, but it didn't need to be. The threat was there, clear as day, and Feliciano had no intention of stepping out of line. He would keep his head down until it came time to be whisked away to Italy. He would go quietly, and both of them knew it.

With a stern nod that was clearly intended as a dismissal, Feliciano closed the door and rushed away. He felt some of the tension rush out of him the moment Cristiano sped away, and he was finally able to make his way to class.

The large building loomed before him, and Feliciano was suddenly remembering some of his earlier apprehension — the thought of facing everybody again causing butterflies to explode in his stomach. He had hoped that he wouldn't have to come back to school, banking on the assumption that he would be in Italy by now. However, it seemed that they were *'stuck here'* as Cristiano had put it.

Does that mean Lovi is still taking this to court?

While it was only natural for his brother to stubbornly hold on, Feliciano had been hoping that he could just slip away until he was old enough to move out in a couple years. He had carefully weighed everything in his mind, and this had been the best solution for all parties involved (he conveniently left his own wellbeing out of the equation).

His decision to leave was supposed to change everything, but here he was at school just like normal. Nothing had changed except who he was living with, and Feliciano was starting to regret his decision. He wanted to go back to Italy soon — maybe putting distance between himself and his brother would expel the traitorous thought in his mind that begged him to run back.

I made this decision, I'm not going back on it.

But every day he felt his resolve weaken just a little more as he remembered what it meant to live with someone as unpredictable as his father. He was close to a breaking point, but Feliciano simply shook his head and marched on towards the large building before him in hopes of an uneventful day.

Feliciano's day started out well enough, being able to walk to his first class without being disturbed. But that was the extent of his luck, it seemed — he just couldn't catch a break.

"Dude, I'm telling you, it's a freaking abomination!"

"Ooh, big word. Didn't know you had it in you, Al."

"Hey, I know big words!"

"Yet *intelligent* is not one of them."

"I'm just saying, raisins in cookies ought to be a war crime."

Feliciano had his head cradled in his hands, gaze fixed firmly on the desk below him. This wasn't out of the ordinary — Matthew and Alfred arguing before class started. But the way the yelling just seemed to grow louder, and louder, and louder, *louder*...

"What, raisins don't have enough calories for you?" Matthew snorted.

Alfred crossed his arms, "You can't tell me that fucking *raisins* belong in a cookie. It's supposed to be a treat, not… not *healthy!"*

Matthew sighed, "The raisins don't make it healthier, and I think they taste just fine in a cookie."

"No taste."

"Excuse me?"

He was going to lose it.

Usually, these little fights didn't bother Feliciano, but he was extraordinarily high-strung at the moment. He felt breathless, his hands growing clammy as he began tapping his foot rapidly against the tile. The argument was growing in intensity now, too, and Feliciano could feel tears come to his eyes when he realized that it wasn't going to stop any time soon.

Please, just stop.

"I *said,* you've got no taste!" Alfred yelled.

"Do you even hear yourself? We're arguing about raisins. Freaking *raisins,* Al." Matthew clicked his tongue, "And they taste fine, just get over it."

"They do not."

"They do so."

Alfred threw his hands up, "Why do I even bother, you're freaking hopeless!"

That did it.

Feliciano suddenly stood, all eyes turning to land on him. His heart threatened to beat out of his chest, the only thought on his mind being *escape.*

"Uh, you alright dude?" Alfred asked, approaching him carefully.

"Um, s-sorry." Feliciano squeaked, putting his head down and rushing out of the classroom.

He turned down the hallway, chest heaving. Feliciano ducked and weaved through the small crowds that still lingered in the hallway, finally finding a deserted area to properly freak out in.

What was that?

Feliciano's eyes were blown wide open as he pushed his back against a locker. Alfred and Matthew had those petty fights everyday and it had never bothered him before. They hadn't even been that loud, so what was different?

'Why do I even bother, you're freaking hopeless.'

Feliciano's breath caught in his throat in realization.

'Why do I even bother, you're fucking worthless.'

Those had been Cristiano's words just that morning, although it wasn't the first time he's said them. Feliciano had already been on the verge of breaking as it was, and the way Alfred had unwittingly echoed his father's poisonous words must have been the final shove to send him tumbling over the edge entirely.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked aloud to himself, completely mortified at the reaction. He had never lost control so quickly before — it wasn't even second period yet!

He shoved his hands into his eyes, pulling in calming breaths to steady himself. There was no way that Feliciano was going back to class after that, so he decided to start ambling aimlessly down the hallways.

Feliciano walked slowly, his eyes eventually glazing over as he zoned out. He actively avoided thinking about what had just happened and the fact that he was going to have to go back to class eventually. Instead he focused on not disconnecting from reality entirely as he mapped out some areas of the school he was unfamiliar with.

He walked along in daze, realising that must have done a poor job at the not-disconnecting-thing when the sound of the bell snapped him back to his surroundings.

Was I really out here the whole hour?

It certainly didn't feel like it.

With a sigh, he shook himself back to reality. Students were beginning to fill the hallway, and Feliciano started pushing his way towards his next class. He had literature next, or as he liked to call it, time for a *siesta.*

Feliciano let just the smallest of smiles grace his face, thinking that he really did need a nap. But just as he was about to turn left and into the classroom, a thought came to him.

His next class was literature.

With Ludwig.

Feliciano felt his shoulders creeping up to his ears as his heart started racing.

No, he'll ask too many questions.

He couldn't face the blond, not right now. Everything was too fresh, and he feared a lengthy interrogation — or worse, *condemnation* — regarding his decision to run. He was already beginning to regret his decision to return to his father, and he was afraid that Ludwig would be able to talk him out of it entirely. He couldn't afford that, especially not now when it may take weeks until he was back in Italy.

Without another thought, Feliciano stopped mid-stride and shot down a hallway to his right.

It wasn't like him to cut class, but he wasn't ready to face the nosey German just yet. He was too perceptive for his own good, and Feliciano knew that he couldn't fake being okay around him.

So he once again found himself walking aimlessly around the school, occasionally having to avoid the odd teacher or faculty member who patrolled the hallways. It wasn't long until the next class, but Feliciano still found himself wandering. It was calm in the still hallways, and for the first time he felt something akin to peace settle in his chest.

Finally lunch rolled around, and Feliciano hadn't attended a single class. He would have felt guilty, but there simply wasn't room in his heart for any more emotions in his current

overwhelmed state.

Students rushed towards the dining hall, but Feliciano walked in the opposite direction. There was nothing in this world or the next that could get him in the cafeteria. He feared that his friends would find him in his usual spot against the lockers, so he continued to drift.

But his peaceful adventure through the school was interrupted by an obnoxiously loud shout, “Hey, wait up!”

Feliciano’s back stiffened as he nervously turned. There, approaching from clear down the hallway, was a concerned-looking Alfred dragging an exasperated Matthew behind him.

“Al, slow down!” Matthew huffed as his excitable twin pulled him down the hallway.

Alfred ignored him, skidding to a halt in front of Feliciano, “I’m so glad I found you, man. I just wanted to say that I’m like really sorry and stuff.”

“For what?” Feliciano asked as he forced his body to relax.

It’s just Alfred and Matthew, calm down!

Unaware of Feliciano's mental struggle, Alfred plowed ahead, “I don’t know if it was something I said, but you looked like really upset. Sometimes I get too loud-”

“Sometimes?” Matthew huffed.

“-and I wanted to apologize because I feel really bad. So… yeah.” Alfred finished, looking unsure of himself — a rare look for him, indeed.

After a beat of silence, Matthew chimed in softly, “I’m sorry too. The argument got a little out of hand.”

Feliciano took the words in, looking between the two brothers as they waited for a response. They looked genuinely guilty, although Feliciano couldn’t imagine why. They weren’t the reason he couldn’t control his anxiety, and they had those petty squabbles everyday. Really, he should be the one to apologize for causing such a scene.

But something told him that his apology wouldn’t be received well, so Feliciano just fixed them both with a shaky smile and said, “It’s okay, it really wasn’t your fault.”

Alfred sighed heavily in relief, “Cool, I was really worried.”

“Are you alright, though?” Matthew asked, never letting his gaze falter

Feliciano got the feeling that Matthew was a lot more perceptive than his identical counterpart, “Um, yes?”

Alfred looked between the two of them, “You sure, dude?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” Feliciano said more firmly, even if his voice did wobble.

Matthew nodded slowly, “Then would you like to go to lunch with us?”

“Uh, actually-”

“Yeah! C’mon, you can sit with us.” Alfred said, already trying to pull the Italian by the wrist along with them.

Feliciano cringed at the grip on his wrist, feeling the bruise there being aggravated. He tried to choke down the panic that bubbled up in his chest at being touched, although the way his voice shook indicated that he was doing a pretty bad job, “U-uh, I-I really don’t-”

“Nah, man, you’re coming with us. You need to eat!” Alfred said brightly, though there was an undertone of seriousness apparent in his voice.

“P-please, I can’t-” Feliciano couldn’t finish, feeling helpless at his own inability to even speak.

Matthew must have noticed something was off, “Al, stop. You’re being way too pushy!”

“Huh?” Alfred turned, noticing for the first time how white Feliciano had gone. “Holy shit, dude, are you alright?”

Feliciano shook his head, bringing his wrist to his chest when he was released. While not on the verge of panic, his body felt like a rubber band stretched to its very limit. He was bound to snap if people kept trying to control his life, and he really didn’t know who would suffer the most damage if he broke.

He was breathing hard, whether from annoyance directed at himself or Alfred, he couldn’t be sure. Maybe it was both, or maybe it was something else. Whatever it was caused Feliciano to sway dangerously as he suddenly felt light-headed.

“Oh my God, please don’t pass out on me!” Alfred yelled in alarm.

Matthew took that as his cue to step in, “What my idiot brother meant-”

“Hey!”

“-was maybe you should sit down.”

Feliciano nodded his assent, accepting Matthew’s help when he was lowered carefully against the wall. He leaned his head back, feeling the cool brick settle some of his nerves. He felt each brother take a seat on either side of them, though both were careful not to touch him.

There’s something really wrong with me. Feliciano thought, dragging a shaky hand through his hair. He couldn’t remember ever being this high-strung — not even when things had been at their worst years ago in Italy. Everything was collapsing down around him, and he wondered if the days he spent around Cristiano were really enough to screw him up this badly or if it was something more deep-seated, something he had failed to address.

The twins were still sitting silently by his side, although it looked like Alfred was going to explode — Feliciano doubted that he was used to being quiet for this long. With a sigh, he finally broke his silence, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to freak out like that.”

Alfred let out a long burst of air, most likely having held his breath to keep from talking. He deflated as he breathed out, instantly perking back up with a sharp inhale, “Don’t even worry about it dude, totally my bad.”

“Alfred doesn’t grasp the concept of *personal space.”* Matthew rolled his eyes.

“I grasp the concept just fine, thank you very much.” Alfred said indignantly. “But seriously,” he turned his head to face Feliciano, “I’ll be more careful next time. I really didn’t mean to like freak you out or anything.”

Feliciano nodded, feeling the guilt radiate off the loud twin next to him, “It’s okay, you just surprised me is all.”

While not technically the truth, the answer seemed to appease Alfred as his smile came back full-force, “Awesome. So you want to get lunch with us then?”

“Um, not really.” Feliciano shrugged.

“But-”

“That’s fine, you don’t have to.” Matthew cut his brother off with a glare.

“Okay, but you need to eat *something.”* Alfred grumbled.

Matthew leaned over to fix Alfred with a disapproving look, “Not everyone has your appetite, if he’s not hungry then that’s fine.”

“But you are hungry, aren’t you?” Alfred implored, setting his gaze on the small teen situated awkwardly between the bickering twins.

Feliciano fidgeted with his hands, thoroughly caught, “Well, maybe a little.”

Try starving.

Physically he was ravenous, but mentally he couldn’t even stand the sight of food. He was too stressed out, anything he ate would just come right back up, he was sure of it.

“I knew it!” Alfred called.

Matthew sighed, “If you’re hungry, then why don’t we just go eat?”

That was a loaded question if Feliciano had ever heard one. Matthew was looking at him carefully, sharp eyes not missing a thing. He didn’t know how to answer, so he offered a half-hearted shrug instead.

“Does this have something to do with what we talked about before?” Alfred asked seriously.

Matthew looked at him curiously, though he held his tongue.

“Uh, kind of.” Feliciano said softly, pulling his knees up to his chest.

Alfred hummed in thought before he suddenly launched himself up, “Hold on, I’ll be right back.”

Both Matthew and Feliciano watched him retreat quickly down the hallway with varying levels of confusion.

“What-”

“No idea.” Matthew huffed, crossing his arms as he leaned back against the wall.

“Okay.” Feliciano said, letting himself settle back down as well.

“So,” Matthew started, turning to get a proper look at the fidgety teen beside him, “what did you and Al talk about.”

Feliciano looked down at his hands, “Not much, he just ate lunch with me a couple weeks ago.”

Matthew hummed curiously, tapping a finger on his chin in thought. He seemed to be contemplating something, or rather, trying to figure something out. Finally he must have come to some kind of conclusion because he looked rather pleased with himself, “It’s the cafeteria, isn’t it?”

“What?” Feliciano looked up in shock.

“It’s too loud, yeah?” Matthew smiled sympathetically, “Is that why you’re out here?”

Well, he had figured out part of the problem. Feliciano nodded, relieved that he had a valid excuse to give the perceptive teen, “Yeah, it’s too… busy, I guess?”

He didn’t know how to properly explain it, but Matthew seemed to understand anyway, “Yeah, I get that. Lot of idiots yelling at the top of their lungs about ‘being the hero,’ right?”

Feliciano laughed into his hand, “Maybe not lots.”

“Excuse me, just *one* idiot then.” Matthew said with a fond roll of his eyes.

“He’s not that bad.” Feliciano said with a shrug.

“He’s bad enough.” Matthew muttered. “You don’t have to live with him.”

“Oh God.” Feliciano let out a quick bark of laughter.

Matthew snorted, “He’s even loud in his sleep.”

“In his sleep?” Feliciano asked incredulously. “Is that possible?”

“When it comes to testing the limits of my sanity, Al finds a way.”

“Yeah, but he sleeps loud?” Feliciano giggled even as he shook his head, unable to fathom how that was possible.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret.” Matthew leaned in close, “Al sounds like a dying walrus when he sleeps.”

Feliciano was truly laughing now, unable to stop another fit of giggles with Matthew started imitating the sound of loud snoring.

“Hey dudes, I’m… what are you doing?” Alfred looked on in confusion.

“Oh, nothing.” Matthew said nonchalantly, sending a wink Feliciano’s way.

The Italian dissolved into another fit of giggles at the action, unable to contain himself when Alfred just looked even more perplexed.

“Ooo-kay... well, anyways I brought something back.” Alfred said, plopping himself back down on the ground.

Feliciano wiped away a tear as his laughter ebbed away. He was still smiling widely when he asked, “What is it?”

“Food!” Alfred yelled, presenting the two with a bag of various types of packaged junk food. “Now we can stay out here and not miss lunch!”

Matthew crossed his arms, “Where did you get all that?”

“Heh, uh…” Alfred rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “I’ve kind of been stocking up for a while. Seriously, my locker is like a food pantry.”

“Why am I even surprised?” he grumbled, but reached for a bag of chips anyways.

Feliciano looked at the pile of food with wide eyes, feeling more than a little intimidated. It kind of reminded him of when Lovino had sent him to school with a ridiculous amount of food when he learned that he had been skipping meals.

Lovi…

And just like that, his mood plummeted.

I hope he’s alright.

He still had no idea what fate had befallen his brother, and with no phone he wasn’t going to find out any time soon. Feliciano hoped that his brother wouldn’t be too angry at him for his decision, but that was really the least of his worries right now.

“Okay dude, eat up.” Alfred said, eyes boring into Feliciano.

He started fidgeting again, “Um, actually-”

“Am I really going to have to force you again?” Alfred sighed, referring to when he had all but ordered him to eat just a few weeks ago.

Feliciano squirmed uncomfortably as he was scrutinized by both brothers, Alfred in concern and Matthew in confusion. He wordlessly reached for a sleeve of crackers.

“That’s what I thought.” Alfred smiled, reaching for a bag of chips for himself.

The crackers that Feliciano was munching on were light enough to not upset his stomach, the food taking away some of the edge of his previous moodiness. He hummed in contentment when he finished the whole sleeve, a feat he was rather proud of.

Alfred was already on his third bag of chips, happily shoving more in his mouth as Matthew looked on in mild disgust.

The three of them sat in the hallway together, each content to just sit and mindlessly eat. Without even realizing what he was doing, Feliciano was reaching for an apple. Alfred smiled proudly at him, grabbing a bag of cookies for himself.

All too soon, lunch was coming to a close. It had been a nice reprieve, although Feliciano knew he was going to have to face reality once again. Matthew stood, reaching a hand down to pull the Italian up next to him.

“Thanks.” Feliciano said quietly when he found his footing.

Alfred shot up on his own, fixing Feliciano with a bright smile, “Any time, dude.”

“It was nice, maybe we should eat out here more often.” Matthew said thoughtfully.

“Hell yeah!” Alfred yelled excitedly. “That way I can make sure you eat, too.”

“Oh, um-” Feliciano looked away nervously.

“Don’t be rude, Al.” Matthew said as he flicked his twin in the arm.

“Ow!”Alfred rubbed at his arm. “What’s so rude about it? I just want to make sure he actually eats something.”

“And if he’s not hungry?” Matthew crossed his arms.

Alfred groaned, “He’s *obviously* hungry, Mattie. Seriously, look at him.”

Feliciano looked down at himself self-consciously.

“Alfred!”

“What?!”

“It’s okay!” Feliciano stepped between the twins before their argument could get out of hand. “I know I don’t eat enough, okay? Alfred’s just looking after me.”

“Well he could be a little more polite about it.” Matthew said, but he seemed mollified for the time being.

Alfred ignored his brother, “Damn straight I’m looking out for you. I’ve tried to stay quiet, but dude, what happened?”

“What do you mean?” Feliciano asked as he looked down at his skinny frame once more.

Alfred groaned in distress, “You were doing so good, man. Like, you were gaining weight and I saw you eating lunch again. But you stopped. What happened?”

“Oh.” Feliciano didn’t know how to answer that. He couldn’t really explain his situation without sparking more worry, and he couldn’t really think of a convincing lie either. So he decided to shrug it away.

Matthew swooped in with the rescue, “That’s none of your business, Al.”

“I know, but-”

“I don’t want to hear it, you’ve said enough for one day.” Matthew said with a glare.

Alfred didn’t look pleased, but backed off the subject.

The bell was bound to ring at any second, and the three started walking down the hallway and towards their respective lockers. It came time for them to split up, but not before Alfred could say, “My offer still stands.”

“What?” Feliciano asked in confusion.

Alfred rolled his eyes, “Last time we ate together, I said that if you ever needed someone to talk to…”

Oh!

Now that he was saying it, Feliciano definitely remembered that. He started nodding, “Thank you, I appreciate it.”

Matthew smiled as he took a step forward to stand next to his brother., “And if you don’t want to deal with him all by yourself, I’d be happy to be there too.”

Feliciano could feel tears come to his eyes, “Thanks.”

I wish I could take you up on it.

There was no way he could confide in somebody about the extent to which he was suffering. Cristiano had made it clear that he was to stay silent, and Feliciano doubted that anybody could help him anyway. Still, he felt an odd sense of relief at having the option.

They split up shortly thereafter, Feliciano feeling a warm sense of calm fill his chest. It was amazing what a belly full of food and good company could do. He still had the whole day ahead of him, and *no* he wasn't going to keep cutting class. But he felt a new sense of determination now that he wasn't nearly as wound up.

"Okay, I can do this." Feliciano breathed, believing the words for the first time that day.

Chapter End Notes

Feli's first day back, part 1 of 2

Yeaaahh so this chapter was getting ridiculously long, so I had to cut it in two. Hope it's alright, but if I didn't split it then y'all would've had to wait another couple days, Sorry :/

Anyways hope you liked it! Alfred and Matthew are freaking wonderful to write, like dang the sassiness. This one was fun, although I feel bad for Feli (author is aware that she has the power to make him not sad, but I am actively choosing to make him miserable...)

Op, oh well. Love you all so much, like honestly everybody who comments is a ray of freaking sunshine. Even if you don't comment and you're just here for the read, thanks :)

Okie, that's it! Peace out.

'Till next time!

Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Francis sat silently behind his desk, chin fit snugly in his hand as he watched his students file lazily in. The room was slow to fill up as the late bell had yet to ring. But despite the fact that his students would continue to arrive even after the bell rang, Francis continued to scan the room in search of one student in particular.

You see, Francis had a plan — a *subtle* plan, as he liked to put it. The insinuation that he lacked the ability to act discreetly by his *dear* friend Gilbert had spurred in him a fierce determination to prove him wrong. After all, he was an artist, subtlety was practically his middle name.

You have too little faith in me, mon ami. Francis thought in exasperation.

Truth be told, this was not the first time he had been asked to assist in something as… *delicate* as this. Gilbert had given him very little information, but Francis was a master at reading his friend. He had spent many drunken nights out with the boisterous albino, and he had been on the receiving end of his fair share or enraged (and sometimes heartbroken) rants regarding the manner of work he was tied up in. It wasn't hard to deduce what Gilbert wanted him to look out for, and Francis was all too happy to do it.

Finally, the teenager Francis was waiting for shuffled quietly in. He looked nervous, fidgeting loosely with his hands, and there was an air around him that just felt *off.* Feliciano kept his eyes downcast, though he did offer a small smile to a quiet boy — *Kiku,* he recalled — as he moved to take a seat next to him.

What is he wearing?

Francis wrinkled his nose up when he saw just how baggy Feliciano's clothes were. The teen was scrawny, true, but that was no excuse. Someone obviously didn't care enough to dress him properly, and Francis made a mental note to relay that bit of information on to Gilbert.

Upon hearing the late bell ring shrilly in the hallway, Francis shook himself out of his quiet musing and let the troubled look melt away into something more suitable to the exciting activity he had planned for the day.

He would show Gilbert he knew how to be subtle, and it all started with this:

"Bonjour my lovely students!" Francis called ecstatically, launching himself up from his desk with a sensational flourish. He was met by blank faces, the response decidedly less enthusiastic than what Francis was hoping for.

He tried again, making his way to the front of the classroom before turning sharply on his heel to face the class in a way that he hoped would inspire a reaction, "I have for you the

most *exhilarating* activity planned!"

Still nothing.

Francis huffed, his bright expression dissolving into an annoyed pout as he scanned the uncaring looks on his students' faces. They always seemed to drag their feet after lunch, and most high schoolers had very little interest (or skill) when it came to the intricacies of the visual arts. In fact, Francis had no doubt that the majority of his students could care less about his class, most of them here for the easy 'A'.

Let's remedy that, oui?

He banished the pout that had previously marred his expression, instead fixing his class with a smirk. Wordlessly he picked up a canvas that he had set up prior to class. He had already covered every table with a plastic tablecloth, a necessary precaution for the type of activity he had planned.

After retrieving a paintbrush and a palette of red paint, he returned to the front and was pleased to note the curious expressions that he was met with, "Is anyone familiar with the concept of 'abstract art'?"

He saw a few students nod loosely. Realizing that that was the best he was going to get, Francis dipped his brush delicately into the paint. After standing motionlessly for just a brief moment, relishing in the way the room felt fraught with anticipation, he suddenly rounded on the canvas, bringing the brush down in a wide arc. The paint splattered, dusting the canvas with a spray of red droplets.

He attacked the canvas with his brush, slashing and hacking rather violently. Throughout it all, Francis kept a serene expression on his face, finally finishing with a sharp flick of the wrist.

Francis turned to face the class, presenting his piece with a bright smile, "Abstract art is not what you see, but what you *feel."*

His eyes brightened when he noticed the way his students looked excited for the first time that day, smirking silently to himself at his own cleverness. Young people were impulsive, spontaneous even. Of course an activity as unrestrained and just downright *fun* would immediately capture their attention.

Teenagers, how predictable.

"Fear, happiness, anger, whatever you are feeling, let it fill you and unleash it onto your canvas." Francis said with just a touch of melodrama. He put his canvas down and pointed towards the countertop to his right, "All the supplies you need are here. Use as much or as little color as you would like, but whatever you decide on, give it *meaning."*

It wasn't a second after he motioned for his class to get moving that they were rushing the countertop. Francis laughed lightly to himself, noticing that only a few students were smart enough to wait out the initial rush. Of those students were Feliciano and Kiku, although

neither looked particularly interested in the assigned project. No, they both had their heads bent over, speaking in hushed tones as they completely disregarded the rowdy class.

Interesting…

Francis leaned against the wall as he observed, finding it strange that two of his most talented students seemed wholly uninterested in the class. Feliciano at the very least was usually a flurry of excitement and passion when he was creating his beautiful works of art — and they were beautiful, Francis suspected the young Italian even surpassed *him.*

But the teen was uncharacteristically subdued, and the way he kept fidgeting indicated to Francis that he was uncomfortable with whatever they were talking about. With a thoughtful hum, he silently creeped his way to lean against the counter behind the two, straining to hear their hushed conversation:

"You've been avoiding us." Kiku whispered.

Feliciano refused to meet his eyes, "I didn't mean to, things are just hard right now."

"What things?" Kiku asked, going so far as to crane his neck to try and force their eyes to meet.

But Feliciano was stubborn it seemed, as he kept his eyes trained carefully on his fidgeting hands, "It's just family stuff. Honestly, I'll be fine."

To Francis it sounded as if the Italian was trying to convince himself of that fact. Apparently Kiku thought so as well, because he fixed him with a light scowl, "Excuse me for my directness, but I would prefer for you to stop lying to me."

"What?" Feliciano finally looked up in surprise.

Kiku shook his head, "You haven't been to school in days, and now that you're here you have been skipping class."

Francis quirked an eyebrow up at that, curiosity piqued.

"How did you know that?" Feliciano asked softly, eyes downcast once more.

"I saw you in the hallway when you should have been in class, and we didn't see you at lunch either." was the whispered response

Feliciano looked at him curiously, *"We?"*

"Sometimes I think you forget that I'm friends with Ludwig as well." Kiku said with a little huff.

Gilbert's little brother… is that so?

Francis watched as Feliciano dropped his head guiltily into his hands, though what was said next was drowned out by the increasingly noisy chatter in the room. With a start, Francis

remembered that he was supposed to be teaching a class.

He cleared his throat, observing the way the Italian jumped in surprise. They turned to face him, and Francis fixed them with a warm smile, “The project is due at the end of class. Better get working, *non?”*

Kiku dipped his head, “My apologies.”

“Sorry!” Feliciano squeaked.

Francis watched in amusement as they simultaneously stood and walked briskly to gather their supplies.

While Francis would have been quite content to sit back and listen in on the two students’ conversation — *it’s not creepy, it’s gathering evidence!* — he knew that with an assignment this messy, there was bound to be a disaster at some point.

As if on cue, there was a shriek of surprise followed by a sharp, “Ow!”

He whipped his head around and was exasperated to find that someone had thrown their paintbrush clear across the room, hitting another student squarely on the forehead. A trail of paint across the tile clearly showed the brush’s path, and with a sigh he realized that he was in for a long period.

Teenagers, Francis thought sullenly, *how predictable.*

Just as Francis had predicted, the class period was indeed long. While there were no more incidences of airborne paintbrushes, the classroom itself was a *mess.* He was glad he had the foresight to lay the disposable tablecloths down, but the cleanup was bound to be an arduous task.

The bell was going to ring in just a few minutes, and most of the students had already deposited their paintbrushes into the sink. There was a smile on virtually everyone’s face, the activity having been a massive hit. Francis smirked at his own brilliance, clearing his throat to attract the attention of his class, “Fantastic job my wonderful students, your passion today was inspiring!”

He smiled warmly at the class, casting a critical eye over the horrible mess that had been made, “But it seems you have used my classroom as a canvas as well, what a horrible mess!” Francis called dramatically, ignoring the laughter he heard from his students.

There were splatters of paint on virtually every surface, although most of those surfaces were blessedly covered. The chaos had been mostly contained, but Francis still had to clean the brushes, wipe down the tables, and dispose of the plastic tablecloths. While it was certainly something he could handle on his own, the cleanup would be much more efficient with some help.

Exactly as planned.

“Since you have so *creatively* destroyed my classroom, I will need one of you to stay back to help with the cleaning.” Francis clapped his hand together, “So who amongst you wishes to lend your poor teacher a hand?”

A predictable hush descended upon the class, and Francis had to suppress his laughter when nobody would meet his eyes. He tapped his chin thoughtfully, scanning each group of students with an appraising eye. After relishing in the theatrical nature of it all, Francis finally let his gaze settle on his intended target, “Ah, Feliciano! Thank you for volunteering.”

Feliciano whipped his head up, confusion etched into his very being, “I didn’t-”

“The rest of you are dismissed. See you tomorrow!” Francis waved, laughing brightly at the way his students scrambled to escape.

Most of the teenagers cleared out in seconds, but a few chose to linger. Francis started collecting canvases and setting them out to dry, noting that Kiku was amongst those who stuck around to wait for the bell. He turned an ear to the conversation, trying to pick up the asian boy’s fleeting words, “Please know that we can’t help if you don’t talk to us.”

“I don’t need help, I can handle it.” Feliciano whispered back.

Kiku shook his head, “You are a terrible liar.”

“I’m not lying.” Feliciano mumbled, though the way his eyes shifted around nervously indicated otherwise.

Whatever Kiku was going to say next was cut off by the piercing sound of the bell. With a sigh, the teen stood with the parting words of, “Don’t close yourself off from your friends, we only want to help you.”

With Kiku’s departure, the classroom was finally empty. Feliciano squirmed awkwardly in his seat, eyes looking anywhere but the flamboyant teacher and his searching gaze. The Italian looked troubled, eyebrows furrowed in apparent thought as he continued to fidget. Francis walked over to him with a smirk, “What’s with the face? Am I really so horrible to be around?”

“Sorry.” he said shortly, although that troubled expression didn’t budge.

Francis sighed, letting the smirk fall from his face, “How about we just start cleaning.”

“What about my next class?” Feliciano asked even as he stood from his seat.

“Don’t worry, I’ll write you a pass.” Francis smiled, gesturing towards the sink that was brimming with soiled paintbrushes, “Can you start rinsing off the brushes for me please?”

Feliciano nodded, wordlessly making his way over to the sink. The gentle sound of the running water echoed pleasantly in the abandoned room. Francis continued to collect canvases, humming thoughtfully when he reached Feliciano’s.

The canvas wasn't the mess of jumbled colors and expressive strokes that he had come to expect out of the bubbly Italian. Instead the painting consisted of a singular stripe of black paint slashed directly down the middle.

That's… an interesting choice.

Francis wasn't a psychologist, nor did he claim to be one. But he knew how to read people, and given how the day's assignment had been about self-expression…

"Tell me about the inspiration behind your piece." Francis said suddenly, still scrutinizing the canvas in his hands.

Feliciano jumped at being addressed so abruptly. He turned from his spot at the sink, looking incredibly unsure of himself, "Um, I'm not sure if there was any."

"Nonsense!" Francis scoffed, "Abstract art is about expression, and I would like to know what emotions you exploited in order to create this most interesting work of art." Here he gestured loosely to the painting, fixing the teen with a searching look.

"Oh, well…" Feliciano looked back down towards the sink, addressing the paintbrushes more than the teacher as he said softly, "I didn't really feel any emotion, so I guess it's the… the lack of emotion?"

Well that wasn't what he was expecting.

To Francis it sounded like Feliciano was troubled by the conclusion he had drawn. He was back to scrubbing harshly at the brushes, head bent over the sink in a furious attempt to end the conversation. Francis obliged if only because he feared that pushing too hard would cause the teen to close himself off completely.

He went back to collecting canvases, finally placing the final one on the drying rack. He walked over to the sink to collect the brushes that Feliciano had set out to dry. Francis let his gaze wander absently to the fidgety teen's hands as they worked, noting that he had rolled his sleeves up. He was about to walk away, but was frozen in his tracks by something decidedly out-of-place on Feliciano's wrist.

Is that a bruise?

Francis furrowed his eyebrows, indeed confirming that the purple mark was a bruise and not remnants of paint from the day's project. He walked away, choosing not to comment on the injury and instead file the piece of information away for later.

Instead, he once again attempted to start a conversation, "I appreciate all your help today, I sure hope I'm not keeping you from anything."

Feliciano shrugged, keeping his eyes downcast.

Francis pouted, "Not one for conversation today, are you?"

"Sorry."

Oh come on.

This wasn't working, but Francis wasn't sure how to coax more out of the Italian without raising suspicion. He didn't want to upset him, but if provoking him was the quickest way to get results, then so be it, "Tell me, how is that family of yours doing?"

"What?" Feliciano's head whipped up.

So much for subtlety.

Francis started balling up the plastic tablecloths, "You drew such a lovely picture of them, and I was simply curious about how they were doing."

Feliciano stopped moving, hands sitting motionlessly in the sink as the water continued to run. His shoulders were tense, and he didn't turn when he answered, "I don't know."

"You don't know?" Francis asked curiously.

The teen shook his head, snapping out of whatever trance he was stuck in before roughly shoving one of the brushes to the side, "No, I don't live with them anymore."

"Is that so?" Francis said, watching the teen from the corner of his eye. "Who are you living with then?"

"My father." Feliciano aggressively turned off the sink, apparently finished with the cleaning.

Francis quirked an eyebrow up, "You don't seem very happy about it."

Feliciano shrugged, glaring down at his hands, "It doesn't matter how I feel about it."

Really now?

"I think you are entitled to your own feelings, don't you?" Francis asked lightly, though he continued to watch the teen out of the corner of his eye.

"I mean," he started fidgeting, not sure where to look, "the world doesn't revolve around me, right? So why should my feelings matter to anyone but myself?"

"That's a very lonely outlook on life, you know." Francis said with a heavy sigh.

"But I am alone." he said softly.

Francis leaned forward, feeling as though he was on the verge of some kind of admission,"Why do you feel that way?"

He looked away, "I did this to myself, I have no right to complain."

"What did you do?" Francis pushed.

Feliciano seemed to have realized he had said too much, because his face took on a guarded expression, "N-nothing!"

Undeterred, Francis continued to prod, “Did something happen to your family?”

The teen looked down, “Uh, w-well-”

“Does this have something to do with your father?” Francis breathed.

Feliciano’s head whipped up, eyes cycling through emotions that he seemed unable to control. Francis thought of his painting, and the way he said it had been inspired by the lack of any emotion, but that wasn’t true at all. It wasn’t the *lack* of any emotion that inspired his art, but the presence of *too many* emotions. He was stressed out to a breaking point, unable to process what he was feeling quick enough before he was moving on, and Francis nearly jumped when his expression finally landed on an emotion he wasn’t prepared for.

Anger.

“I’m sorry, is this really any of your business?” he asked with a fierce glare.

Francis was floored by the statement, realizing that he may have pushed too hard, “My apologies, I was just-”

“You were trying to figure out what’s wrong with me, right?” Feliciano crossed his arms defensively across his chest, looking ready to storm right out of the room.

He was losing control of the situation, “No, just making conversation.”

“Well, I’m done talking!” he snapped, but there was something other than anger that colored the tone.

He sounded hurt, but for the life of him Francis couldn’t figure out why, “Of course, it was not my intention to upset you.”

“It never is.” he said darkly, grabbing his stuff as he stormed away.

“If I may leave you with some parting words,” Francis called, pleased when the teen stopped in his tracks to give him an impatient look, “A problem shared is a problem halved, just remember that.”

Feliciano dropped his eyes, a look of profound sadness breaking through for a split second before the angry front was back up. He marched away, not sparing another look before he had disappeared.

“Well,” Francis sighed, leaning heavily against one of the countertops, “that could have gone better.”

Maybe Gilbert was right, subtlety was clearly not a skill he excelled at. But despite the fact that he had clearly angered the usually mild-mannered teen, he did feel as though he understood him a bit better.

He pulled out his phone, typing out a quick message to the albino:

To: Gil

My apologies, I may have upset him.

Francis put his phone on the counter and began wiping down the tables. He was troubled by the short conversation he had with the teen. The massive mood swing was cause for concern, and the way he had sounded so *hurt.*

The bruise was also a point of worry, and he was torn on what he should do about it. Francis knew why he was asked to help in this situation — it was the same reason he was asked last time. As a teacher he was considered a mandated reporter. That meant that he had a legal obligation to go to the authorities if he suspected abuse or neglect. His word had some weight behind it, and if something went to court then his testimony would be seriously considered.

But at the same time, he couldn't act too early.

Gilbert had simply asked him to monitor the Italian, and to gently prod into his personal life. He could then record his findings and present them if he was called on by the court as a witness. But he had to give Gilbert enough time to gather all the evidence he needed first.

With a sigh, he got back to his cleaning. He felt just a bit bad at upsetting Feliciano, but that couldn't be helped. He'd have to make it up to him at a later date, but at the very least he had started gathering valuable information.

I may not be subtle, but I get results.

Francis smiled lightly as he continued to clean, mentally wishing Gilbert luck in what was sure to be one tough endeavor.

Feliciano stormed out of the classroom, his mind a confused mess of hurt and anger. There were tears brimming in the corners of his eyes as he grappled with what just happened.

Is it that obvious that something's wrong with me?

It seemed as though Francis knew a lot more than he let on, and Feliciano had felt trapped the moment the questions had started. He didn't know if the teacher really did have outside knowledge on his situation or if he was so obviously screwed up that people felt the need to comment on it.

Actually, he didn't know which option was worse.

Why can't I just live my own life?

Feliciano put his head down and marched towards his next class, his footsteps echoing loudly off the walls. It seemed everyone was worried about him for one reason or another, and if one more person tried to pry where they weren't wanted, he was going to lose it.

With another irritated huff, he pushed his way into the locker room. He was only a couple minutes late, but everyone had already cleared out of the large room. Feliciano felt a bit of

relief at that, now free to change in peace.

He pulled his locker roughly open, feeling ready to scream at the frustration he felt. He was hoping for a quiet, uneventful day, but due to his own inability to get a handle on his emotions, he now had *all* of his friends *plus* a teacher worried about him. Really the only way this could get worse was if-

“Feliciano?”

Why does God hate me?

Feliciano slammed his locker closed before ramming his head to rest roughly against it, “Hi Ludwig.”

He heard rather than saw the way the German shuffled over, “What are you doing, you’ll hurt yourself!”

“Good to see you too.” Feliciano huffed, still feeling annoyance flow through his veins. He pulled away slowly from the locker, turning to face the tall blond.

Ludwig’s eyebrows were furrowed in confusion, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Feliciano said, even as tears of frustration came to his eyes. He had been an emotional breakdown waiting to happen all day, starting with Alfred and Matthew that morning. While the twins had miraculously recovered the situation before he could snap, the compound effect of every other person expressing their worry when he was *fine* was about to break him.

“Don’t lie to me, what happened?” Ludwig demanded, crossing his arms across his chest.

Feliciano swiped viciously at his eyes, trying to rub away the moisture there, “Nothing happened, it’s just me.”

“I don’t know what that means.” Ludwig said as he took a step closer. “You’ve been avoiding me all day, and I just want to know if you’re okay.”

“I said I was *fine.”* Feliciano said, even as his chest began to heave. He could feel the beginnings of panic settle uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach. The worst part was, he couldn’t even pinpoint what was triggering the feeling.

Why am I so messed up?

Ludwig looked over his shaking frame carefully, “There’s something wrong, but I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me.”

“There’s nothing to talk about, just leave me alone!” Feliciano called loudly, feeling as though he was losing control of himself.

“I haven’t seen or heard from you in *days.”* Ludwig said with a well-meaning glare. “I think there’s plenty to talk about.”

Feliciano desperately shook his head, noting with some concern that his vision was spotted with black dots, “I can handle it.”

“But you don’t have to alone.” Ludwig implored.

‘A problem shared is a problem halved.’

Feliciano recalled his teacher’s parting words, knowing in his heart that they were true. But he couldn’t, not without risking Cristiano’s ire.

“Yes I-I can.” Feliciano said, shoulders creeping up his ears as he tried to stave off the impending panic attack.

Ludwig snorted, “Don’t forget that I know who you live with. You’re not okay, just let me help.”

“Oh, so you think you know everything now, don’t you.” Feliciano gasped out, gripping at his chest when his heart started to pound painfully against his ribcage.

The blond refused to take the bait, lowering his voice when he noted the state of distress the Italian was in, “I’m not letting this go, don’t you want someone to talk to?”

Yes.

Of course he did. In fact, Feliciano was desperate to confide in someone. He had never been one to shoulder his burdens alone — that trait belonged to his older brother — but at the same time, he was leaving. In a few weeks he’d be back in Italy where he’d feel the stinging bite of loneliness in its entirety. Maybe it was best to distance himself now so it wouldn’t hurt as badly later on.

“Are you listening to me?” Ludwig asked worriedly.

Feliciano shook his head, a faint buzzing drowning out his thoughts as he succumbed to the panic. It was all too much, the pressure growing and growing until it threatened to swallow him whole.

Ludwig approached him carefully, trying to defuse the situation, “What’s wrong, are you alright?”

“W-what?” Feliciano asked, finally snapping out of the trance-like spell he had been caught under. Distantly he noted that his hands were shaking uncontrollably, and that he was breathing so hard that he feared he may pass out.

“Why don’t you sit down.” the blond said carefully.

“O-okay.” Feliciano said when he felt how hard his body shook, his teeth even beginning to clang together uncomfortably. He tried to lower himself, but was completely helpless to do anything but yelp in surprise when his knees suddenly buckled.

He would have crumpled into an undignified heap on the floor had not a strong arm caught him around the waist, “Gotcha.”

Feliciano’s breath hitched at the sudden contact, but his reaction was swallowed up by the fact that he was already losing himself to the throes of a panic attack. He was lowered carefully to the ground, and the moment he was released, he curled up onto his side.

Ludwig watched with wide eyes, unable to do anything other than stare. He reached his hand out in what was probably supposed to be a calming gesture, but one flinch from the Italian had him recoiling violently away, “What do you need? How can I help?” he asked frantically.

But Feliciano couldn’t answer him if he tried, instead opting to grip the sides of his head with his hands in a desperate attempt to block everything out. He squeezed his eyes shut, feeling a few tears roll down his cheeks. His heart felt like it was about to explode, and he tried not to choke on his own breath.

He felt like he was losing his mind, the fact that he couldn’t figure out *why* he was panicking only adding to the sinking feeling in his chest. All he knew was that he had been angry, and hurt, and about every other negative emotion that he could possibly feel all at once. It was overwhelming to the most extreme degree, and he could blame nobody but himself.

Ludwig still watched on in horror, not daring to so much as move as Feliciano tried to come down from the panic.

Finally after ten impossibly long minutes, Feliciano was able to gain control of his breathing. He pulled in deep calming breaths, wiping away the stray tears with the back of his hand. A tremor still worked its way through his body every once in a while, but on the whole the horrible shaking had abated.

Feliciano mentally prepared himself for the barrage of questions he was sure he was in for, sniffling slightly to himself at his own pathetic existence. He looked around in a daze, meeting Ludwig’s bewildered eyes, “I’m sorry, I’m alright now.”

The blond was still sitting rigidly in front of him, “Was that a panic attack?”

Feliciano brought in a shuddering breath as he uncurled and pushed himself up on shaky arms, “Y-yeah.”

Upon noticing the Italian’s struggle to sit up on his own, Ludwig shook himself out of his own shock and gently helped him to sit against the wall.

Feliciano was too tired to feel any discomfort at the contact, but he did note how he felt an odd sense of relief when the tall blond sat down next to him, “I’m sorry.”

Ludwig sighed in exasperation, “Would you stop apologizing?”

“But I keep losing control.” Feliciano breathed, dropping his head behind him to rest on the wall.

The blond was silent for a handful of minutes, staring contemplatively ahead. He suddenly turned towards Feliciano, a guilty look in his eyes, “Was it me?”

Feliciano snapped his head to the side, “What?”

“Was it me?” Ludwig repeated. “Was I the one that triggered the panic?”

Feliciano fidgeted loosely with his hands, “I don’t think so.”

Ludwig sighed heavily in relief, “So what did?”

My stupid brain.

He glared down at the floor, aggravated with himself. The mood swings he was experiencing were getting increasingly dramatic, and he was ashamed that it had taken a panic attack to curb his earlier irritation. He chose not to acknowledge Ludwig’s question and instead continue to pick harshly at his nails.

When Ludwig realized that no answer was forthcoming, he turned his head so he was no longer bearing down on the small Italian. Their shoulders bumped into each other at every intake of breath, the air around them feeling far too heavy.

Feliciano could feel his eyes drifting closed, all energy thoroughly depleted. Aside from that, he really didn’t sleep well these days — sharing a house with someone who had destroyed most of his childhood tended to have that effect. In a gesture that was painfully familiar, he flopped sideways to rest his head on Ludwig’s shoulder, “I hate this.”

Ludwig snorted, “That makes two of us.”

He was growing more tired by the second, shifting so he rested more comfortably against the blond. Feliciano would have been content to fall off the edge of consciousness entirely, but Ludwig wouldn’t let him, “Are you going to tell me what’s wrong now?”

Feliciano’s breath hitched, seeing two paths set out before him. The first one was of isolation — a path he had intended to walk down from the beginning. It was the path of least resistance, even though the loneliness would be unbearable.

His other choice was to confide in someone — namely, Ludwig. That presented a whole host of complications, including making the inevitable goodbye that much harder. Truth be told, he thought that when he had run from Ludwig’s apartment that that would have been the last time he’d ever see the blond. But it seemed he was given a little more time, a small mercy in this horrible life he was living.

I guess it doesn’t matter either way.

With that thought in mind, Feliciano peered up with watery eyes, “Hey Ludwig?”

Ludwig looked down, doing his best not to jostle him, “Yeah?”

“I like you a lot.” he said with a small smile.

His face went an interesting shade of pink, “Oh, well… thank you?”

“Pfft, did you really just thank me?” Feliciano giggled, although his voice cracked painfully as a result of his earlier crying.

“Well what else am I supposed to say to that?” Ludwig asked with a huff, irritated that he was being made fun of.

Feliciano shrugged with a playful smirk, “I don’t know, like maybe that you like me back?”

“I-I mean, I do.” He looked trapped, face darkening evermore.

“So why can’t you say it?” Feliciano teased.

Ludwig shifted his eyes around the locker room, “I mean- uh- some of us aren’t so careless with our words!”

Feliciano suddenly looked down, his smile fading into something decidedly more wistful, “They’re not careless.”

That sobered the blond up pretty quickly, his nervous fidgeting ceasing almost instantly. With a small sigh, he stared down determinedly at his lap. He looked like he was contemplating something, eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Finally, he nervously reached down to gently grip one of the Italian’s hands before bringing it up to ghost a featherlight kiss on top of it, “I-I like you a lot, too.” he mumbled.

Feliciano couldn’t contain himself, *“Aww,* that was so romantic! I knew you had it in you, that was so smooth!”

Ludwig instantly dropped his hand, turning to the side as he huffed in annoyance, “Yeah, well don’t get used to it.”

Feliciano watched in amusement, feeling ridiculously happy all of a sudden. He hadn’t felt this relaxed in days, and that was really quite a feat given the fact that he had just suffered through a panic attack.

I wish it could last.

There was a sudden pang in his chest when he realized how fleeting this sense of happiness was. His smile turned pained, and Feliciano breathed out quietly, “I’m going to miss you a lot.”

“What was that?” Ludwig asked, shifting to look down at him.

Feliciano shook his head, “Nothing, I’m just tired.”

“Well there’s nothing stopping you from taking a nap.” Ludwig said with a small shrug.

“But, class is-”

“Halfway done.” Ludwig rolled his eyes, “You’ve already skipped every other class, what’s one more?”

Feliciano looked down, “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“You should still go to class.” Feliciano tried to say in a convincing voice, but the way he settled further into his side betrayed his true desire.

Ludwig snorted, “Do you really think I’d leave you alone after that?”

Feliciano frowned, “Yeah, but-”

“Just sleep.” Ludwig ordered with a huff.

With a long-suffering sigh, Feliciano did as directed, “Yes, sir.”

He curled up on his side, the spot on the floor not exactly the most comfortable, but he was really too exhausted to care. Ludwig lifted an arm before snaking it around his shoulders, letting the Italian rest in the crook of his arm. He was about to drift off entirely when Ludwig mumbled softly, “We still need to talk when you wake up.”

Feliciano nodded softly, having expected that. Ludwig was nothing if not nosey, but he really couldn’t fault him for it. While Feliciano had made the decision to enjoy his final weeks with the blond, he couldn’t get carried away. He’d share some of his fears and anxieties, but he couldn’t let Ludwig know the full extent to which his life was unravelling.

This is such a bad idea.

While he knew that he was only setting himself up for heartbreak in the end, he couldn’t help but feel relief that he still had at least one remnant of his old life back. It may very well kill him when it came time to leave, but right now he felt so comfortable and secure in the tight grasp around his shoulders that he couldn’t find it in himself to care. Feliciano was going to enjoy the last piece of happiness he had left, consequences be damned.

Chapter End Notes

Oh BABY I'm so glad I could finally get this out. Sheesh, work has been k i l l i n g me (I had a thirteen hour day yesterday, it was the worssttt).

But enough about my bellyachin' lmao.

Hope you liked the chapter! It was a bit of a rollercoaster, and jeez is it longer than I expected, but I really hope you guys enjoyed it :)

That's all I got, pls everyone stay safe and I'll catch ya later <3

'Till next time!

Chapter 45

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio padded silently into the small apartment, closing the door softly behind him. He slipped off his shoes and noticed with some concern that the curtains were drawn, bathing the apartment in a cool shade that chilled him to the bone. He scowled at the covered windows, marching his way over to open them once more.

The room was flooded in the warm yellow glow of the sun, immediately dissipating some of the horribly oppressive atmosphere that permeated the apartment. Antonio huffed, recalling how he had thrown the curtains open that morning in order deter the depressive aura that seemed to grip them ever since Feliciano left.

Well, at least this means that Lovi got out of bed.

Antonio ran a hand through his hair at that thought. Lovino hardly left their bedroom anymore, too busy wallowing in all the guilt he felt — not to mention he was still hurt after his little encounter on the street. Antonio supposed that he'd be right there wallowing in his own depression if he still didn't have to go to work everyday.

With a small shake of the head, Antonio made his way further into the apartment. He rubbed at his eyes tiredly, spent after a long day at work. He had been working overtime lately, although he feared it still wasn't enough.

"We'll figure it out." he mumbled to himself, trying desperately to believe it.

Antonio made it to his bedroom, breath catching painfully in his throat by what he found. There, laying listlessly on the bed staring straight up at the ceiling, was Lovino. His face was blank — has been for days — and he didn't even spare a glance in Antonio's direction when he walked in.

The room had been plunged into darkness, the only light streaming in through the doorway where Antonio stood in anguish. It wasn't surprising to find Lovino sprawled out on the bed in complete darkness, at least, it wasn't surprising these days. Losing his brother to a man that had tormented them for the majority of their lives had destroyed his will to do anything — his fear that he'd only make things worse by pursuing the case only feeding the depression. It was a vicious cycle of self-hate and helplessness, and Antonio was at a loss as to what to do about it.

With a heavy sigh, he flipped on the light to try to dispel the depressing atmosphere. It didn't quite work, but Lovino did scrunch his eyes up in annoyance. He walked over to the bed, kneeling beside it to get on eye level with his apathetic boyfriend, "Lovi?"

Lovino offered a small grunt in acknowledgement.

“Lovi, you have to get up.” Antonio begged.

“Why?” he asked lifelessly.

Antonio sniffled, feeling close to tears at the defeated tone. Lovino’s eyes were red-rimmed, a hand still held protectively over his bruised abdomen as he kept his gaze fixed upwards — staring desolately at the ceiling above without a trace of life in that far-away gaze. So far nothing had gotten through to him, but still he tried, “Because we’re already behind on our rent and I really need you right now.”

“You don’t need me, I’ll just let you down.” he said shakily, eyes never wavering from the chipped and peeling paint above.

Antonio shook his head, leaning forward to grab Lovino’s hand, “You could never let me down.”

“I let Feli down.” he breathed, face scrunching up in a look of pure self-loathing. “He needed me and I fucked it up.”

That was more life than Antonio had heard from him in what felt like years, “It wasn’t your fault, he-”

“Oh, cut the bullshit already.” Lovino growled, the look of self-derision morphing into a heated glare, “I promised him that I’d take care of us, and I wasn’t enough — just say it already, we both know it’s true.”

Antonio jumped at the sudden vitriol, wondering if those days spent wrapped in misery were about to explode, “No, I refuse to say that because it’s *not* true.”

“Oh yeah?” Lovino’s glare grew in intensity, some of his fiery attitude returning, “Then why isn’t my brother still here with us.”

“That doesn’t mean-”

“That doesn’t mean what?” he propped himself up on his elbows, eyes finally snapping to meet Antonio’s, “That doesn’t mean that I’m a failure?”

Antonio sucked in a sharp breath, “No, that’s not-”

“Because I’m pretty sure that’s exactly what it means!” Lovino snapped, finally sitting all the way up as his tone grew increasingly agitated.

Antonio shook his head, tightening his grip on his hand, “You did everything you could, and-”

“And it *still* wasn’t enough!” Lovino snatched his hand out of the grip, chest heaving as all the pent-up grief was suddenly unleashed at once, “I did everything the wrong way! Christ, I got myself arrested and lost my brother to a monster who used to put fucking cigarettes out on our skin *because he thought it was funny!”*

Antonio recoiled, breath catching painfully in his throat, “But-”

“No!” Lovino yelled. “You are not allowed to defend me here because I can’t do fucking *anything* right!” His chest was heaving, hands tangling painfully in his hair as he finally broke after days of lifeless staring, “I got fired from my job because I broke the damn law and now my brother’s gone, we can’t pay rent, we can’t afford food, and it’s *all my fucking fault!”*

Antonio was shaking his head, wondering if this was worse than the despondency or not. Lovino had probably been suppressing this explosion for days, and all it took was the smallest of shoves to send him over the edge entirely.

Please, stop blaming yourself. He thought, tears springing forth.

But Lovino wasn’t finished, “I’m a fucking curse, don’t you get it?” He gripped desperately at his chest, whether from physical or mental anguish, he couldn’t be sure, *“Nonno* is dead, my mother left us, and now my brother’s gone too. Everyone I love always leaves in the end, and you’ll leave next!”

“I won’t leave you.” Antonio breathed, unable to even fathom that possibility.

Lovino only glared fiercer, tears now flowing freely down his face, “You will! Everybody does, and I’ll be all alone.”

Antonio could only watch in astonishment as Lovino viciously swiped at his eyes, “Lovi, I-”

“Why haven’t you left yet?” Lovino choked on a sob, “Just go already!”

Antonio launched himself up from his kneeling position and threw himself at his distraught boyfriend. He pulled Lovino into his chest, wrapping him in a bone-crushing hold without a word.

Lovino’s body shook as he tried to squirm desperately out of the grasp, “No, let me go!” He pushed roughly at his chest, trying with all his might to get loose from the hold. His breathing came out in pained gasps, twisting and clawing to escape.

But throughout it all Antonio held firm, burying his head into the Italian’s hair.

I won’t let you go.

Lovino’s breath hitched dangerously, his attempts at getting away growing weaker with each passing second, “Just… just leave me alone.”

“Never.” Antonio whispered.

Lovino brought his hands up to Antonio’s chest, body tense like he was about to launch into another attempt to break free. But instead of pushing him away like Antonio expected, he tangled his hands in the front of his shirt and broke down in earnest. His shoulders hitched up as sob after sob broke through, “Fucking *dammit!”*

"Shh, it's okay." Antonio consoled, feeling on the verge of a breakdown himself.

"It's not!" Lovino shot back even as he gasped for breath, "My brother's back with *him* and it's all… it's all my-" He couldn't choke out any more words, instead choosing to bury his head further into Antonio's chest as he cried.

Antonio could do little more than hold him, beginning to rock back and forth in a way that he hoped was soothing. He had no words of comfort to offer, nothing that could possibly take the pain away. It was like some horrible nightmare that they just couldn't wake up front, their lives left in shambles in more ways than one.

Not only had they lost the youngest member of their little family to a known abuser and probable sociopath, but Lovino was a nonfunctioning disaster. He could hardly pull himself out of bed for the guilt he felt, leaving him unable to get a new job. They had never been particularly stable when it came to their finances, and the loss of half of their income had put them in a right crisis. They hardly had enough money for food anymore, and they were well on their way to becoming homeless the moment they were evicted. Not only that, but Lovino was still looking at substantial fines due to his misdemeanor charges.

They were drowning, suffocating, and Antonio sucked in a sharp breath just to remind himself that he could still breathe.

Lovino grunted in pain when Antonio unconsciously gripped him tighter, looking up with watery eyes as his crying finally came to a stuttering halt.

"Ah, sorry." Antonio breathed, consciously trying to loosen his grip.

Lovino sniffled, bringing up a hand between their bodies to swipe at his eyes. His breathing came out in pained gasps, and Antonio remembered with a start that he was still injured, "Does it hurt?"

"You're gonna have to be more specific." Lovino choked out wryly.

Antonio sighed, pulling the Italian away from his own body in order to inspect him, "The bruises, do they hurt?"

Lovino squirmed uncomfortably, keeping his eyes downcast, "I'll be fine."

Antonio scoffed as he kept scrutinizing him. There was a faint bruise on his wrist where he was apparently grabbed before being punched in the gut. Other than that, his shirt hid most of the damage, although there were dark smudges under his eyes that would look like bruises had Antonio not known that it was more likely due to exhaustion.

He hardly slept before all this…

With an annoyed huff, Antonio pulled Lovino back in for a gentle hug, not willing to fight him over his injured state. However, there was one thing that Antonio was willing to fight on, "Lovi, when's the last time you've slept?"

Lovino went tense in the hold, "Why does it matter?"

“You know why.” Antonio sighed, closing his own eyes as he felt his own energy depleted after the emotional outburst, “How about we take a nap?”

Lovino shook his head, “Can’t sleep.”

“You need to try, come on.” Antonio said softly, laying them both down as he kept Lovino wrapped firmly in his grip.

His breath hitched, “I really can’t sleep.”

“You have to, Lovi.” Antonio said sternly.

“Please, don’t make me.” Lovino said softly, eyes squeezed shut as his body went completely limp, his head flopping heavily on the pillow beneath him

“Lovi?” Antonio asked in alarm. Normally he would have been pleased with the lack of a proper fight or struggle from the Italian, but the way he had just completely surrendered was downright disturbing.

“I can’t sleep.” Lovino started crying soundlessly, his eyes still screwed shut as he tangled his hands into Antonio’s shirt once more, “It hurts too much. Please, *please* don’t make me.”

He was begging.

Lovino was begging.

Antonio felt a cold spike of dread drill into his stomach at the implications of that. He had only heard Lovino sound so desperate once before, years ago after a particularly nasty incident with their father involving a fight and a glass table. But even back then, he didn’t sound so broken, and if he had resorted to *begging* of all things, then something was horribly wrong.

“Okay, I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to.” Antonio whispered, bringing a hand up to gently wipe away some of the tears that ran down his face. “But you need to tell me why.”

“I-I just *can’t.”* he gasped out.

Antonio kept caressing his face even though most of the tears had already dried, “Why did you say it hurt?”

Lovino sniffled, prying his eyes slowly open, “All I see is *him* and my brother and I just-” he couldn’t finish the sentence, hiccuping as he shook his head in distress.

Antonio’s heart broke for him, “You’re getting nightmares?”

“No.” he choked out. “They’re memories.”

Oh Dios…

“Memories of what?” Antonio asked hollowly, knowing full well what was coming next.

“Of everything!” Lovino wailed dejectedly. “Of all the *bullshit* he put us through.” He was crying again, but this time he made no attempt to stop it.

Antonio felt tears spring to his own eyes at the words, unable to string together a suitable response. He didn’t know what to say to that because even he didn’t know the full story. Lovino never talked about the abuse he and his brother had suffered as children, although Feliciano had let a few details slip — that’s why it was all the more surprising when he started rambling:

“I still can’t stand the sight of cigarettes.” he gasped hysterically into Antonio’s chest. “The way they *burned* a-and it wouldn’t s-stop hurting for *hours.”*

“Lovi-”

“They still hurt!” Lovino suddenly shouted, pinning Antonio to the spot when his eyes suddenly snapped upwards, “The scars, they still hurt, and I can’t even ignore it anymore because *everything* hurts.”

Antonio closed his eyes in distress, immeasurable rage flowing through his being as he mentally cursed Cristiano for all the damage he had inflicted. The physical injuries were one thing, but the psychological toll was on a whole other level.

“Oh *Dio,* the way he would yell and scream about *everything* and… and-” Lovino sucked in a shuddering breath, unbidden memories racing through his brain. “Fuck, there was one time he threw me down the damn stairs because I was taking too long or some bullshit, and it *hurt* and I think my shoulder’s still fucked up because of it-”

“Lovi, please stop.” Antonio breathed, knowing that Lovino needed to vent but also knowing that he couldn’t bear to hear about it any longer.

But it seemed that Lovino didn’t hear the whispered plea, “And I tried to tell a teacher what was happening, but she didn’t believe me because everyone thought I was just picking fights, but I wasn’t and Feli was too scared to say anything-”

“Lovi.” Antonio said just a little more firmly.

“And now my brother’s back with him, probably going through all the same bullshit again because I can’t get ahold of the fucking lawyer-”

“Lovino!” Antonio said loudly, just shy of yelling.

Lovino shut his mouth with a *snap,* eyes looking around wildly. He seemed to realize that he had been ranting, because his face went red in embarrassment before he buried his head in Antonio’s chest once more with a mumbled, “Sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry.” Antonio said shakily, threading his fingers through Lovino’s hair. “I don’t know how to make it better.”

Lovino shook his head, shoulders hitching up as he squeezed his eyes shut, “Nothing can make this better.”

Antonio’s breath caught in his throat, trying desperately to block out the hopelessness that threatened to creep in. At this rate, Lovino was going to spiral into a depression that would seal their fate. They would be evicted at the end of next week, and then their lives were well and truly over. They were broke with no family to fall back on — Antonio refused to humor the thought of reaching out to his parents for help, no matter how desperate things got — and they were staring down the very real possibility of being homeless without a penny to their names.

Oh Dios, what do we do?

There was nothing to do, nothing to be said. The sun was beginning to dip, but still the two laid together in bed, both praying for a miracle that was never going to come. For hours, Antonio kept absentmindedly playing with Lovino’s hair in a desperate hope that it would lull him into some much needed sleep. But Lovino kept his eyes stubbornly open, drawing nebulous little shapes on Antonio’s chest until late into the night.

Not a sound escaped either of their lips even as the moon began to fall and the beginning of a new day was already on the horizon.

Antonio was suddenly jerked awake by the sound of his phone. He groaned as he reached around blindly for it, feeling a warm body curled up into his side. With a little hum of victory, Antonio felt his fingers curl around the obnoxious device. He pried his eyes open and squinted at the screen, noting with some alarm that it was one in the afternoon.

So I guess I did fall asleep.

Antonio shook his head, turning the ringer off as he looked down to where he felt someone plastered to his side.

Unsurprisingly, it was Lovino.

Surprisingly, he was asleep.

With a sad smile, Antonio laid back down to wrap himself around the smaller. It was a marvel that he was asleep, especially given the fact that he had basically poured his heart out the night before. Come to think of it, maybe that was why he was finally able to find some peace.

Antonio moved slowly, careful not to jostle Lovino as he unlocked his phone to see who had disturbed him. There were a number of text messages, all from the same familiar loudmouth…

From: Gilbert

Hey toni

From: Gilbert

Yo

From: Gilbert

You awake dude?

From: Gilbert

heyyyyy

From: Gilbert

wake up!

Antonio shook his head in annoyance, turning off his phone with every intention of falling back asleep. However, just as he was about to put the phone back on the nightstand, another text came through:

From: Gilbert

Sooo, I'm outside of your apartment

What?

He scowled down at his phone, punching in a quick reply:

To: Gilbert

Sleeping. Go away.

Once again, Antonio was prepared to toss the phone to the side, but Gilbert was relentless:

From: Gilbert

HE LIVES

From: Gilbert

ok dude this is an abduction

From: Gilbert

I need you to come with me

The constant barrage of texts was getting annoying, but Antonio was curious:

To: Gilbert

Why would I?

He watched his screen anticipating a quick reply, but this time he had to wait. Antonio chewed at his lip impatiently, sparing another glance down to where Lovino had a hand twisted tightly in the front of his shirt. His breathing was even, and Antonio smiled softly as he was reminded that he still had one good thing in his life.

From: Gilbert

I'm gonna need you to trust me

Antonio quirked an eyebrow up at that, having to forcefully tear his gaze away from his sleeping boyfriend long enough to type out a response:

To: Gilbert

Why?

The response was almost immediate:

From: Gilbert

It's about Feli

All the blood ran cold in Antonio's veins, thumbs hovering uselessly over the keyboard on his phone. His breathing was shallow, and he cast his eyes down to confirm that Lovino was still asleep.

What's wrong with Feli? Is he alright?

Antonio was about to type out exactly that thought when another text came through:

From: Gilbert

And Lovino too

From: Gilbert

Will explain in a bit, just come outside!!

Well, how could Antonio say no to that?

With a long-suffering sigh, he went to untangle his body from where he was still curled tightly around Lovino. He weighed the pro's and con's of waking him when Gilbert tacked on one last point:

From: Gilbert

Also dont tell Lovino

"Great." Antonio mumbled, not knowing how much he really trusted the albino. However, he really had nothing else better to do — today was his day off — and quite honestly, he didn't think that things could get much worse.

He ran a hand tiredly down his face, propping himself up on his elbows as he prepared to roll out of bed. It was slow going, as he desperately wanted Lovino to remain asleep, but it seemed all his efforts were in vain when a groggy voice muttered, “Toni?”

Dammit.

Antonio pushed a smile on his face, although it felt forced, “Good afternoon, *amor.”*

Lovino’s breath hitched at the endearment, not having heard it in far too long, “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, why would you say that?” Antonio asked nervously, realising with some guilt that the stress of the past couple weeks had left very little room for any kind of closeness that usually characterised a relationship — unfortunately that included those little terms of endearments Antonio loved to use so much. He resolved himself to make them part of his normal speaking habits once more.

“You got up.” Lovino breathed, eyes suddenly going wide in distress, “Are you finally leaving me?”

Antonio choked on his own breath, immediately sitting back down on the bed to reassure him, “No, I would never.”

Lovino sat up, arms hugged around his own middle as he whispered, “Then where are you going?”

Antonio floundered for a convincing lie to tell him, realizing that he was in a precarious situation. Lovino was obviously feeling insecure, apparently dealing with abandonment issues that Antonio hadn’t even realized he had. He was already so broken up about everything and if he learned that Antonio was doing things behind his back, it would cause profound damage to not just his psyche, but their relationship as well.

What do I say?

He cast his eyes around wildly, looking for an excuse. Finally, his eyes landed on his phone as an idea came to him, “I was just called into work.”

Lovino looked up with a hopeful look in his eyes, “Really?”

Antonio nodded guiltily. It’s not like he wanted to lie to him, but he needed to know what Gilbert was talking about, “Yeah, I won’t be long though.”

“Oh, okay then.” he said, slumping over once more in apparent exhaustion.

Antonio watched as Lovino’s eyes drifted shut, although it was doubtful that he would fall asleep again. With a sigh, he stood and began getting dressed — putting on his work clothes to not look suspicious before throwing a hoodie on. He was ready in five minutes flat, an impressive time given that he had been so rudely awakened from a dead sleep.

Shaking his head in annoyance, Antonio went back to the bed to retrieve his phone. He picked it up, relieved to note that there were no more texts blowing up the screen. After shoving the device into his back pocket, he leaned over to run his hand through Lovino's hair, "I have to go now, Lovi."

Lovino pried his eyes open, looking far too exhausted to properly function in his current state, "You're coming back though, right?"

Antonio's felt his heart ache, "Of course, *tesoro."*

Once again, his breath hitched at the endearment, "And you won't be long?"

"You won't even know I'm gone." Antonio said with a shaky smile, finding the vulnerability wildly out of character.

"Doubt it, but whatever." Lovino said with some semblance of his normal self returning.

There's the Lovi I know.

Antonio smirked as he leaned forward, joining their lips in a soft kiss before breathing, *"Te amo, mi vida."*

Lovino looked a little shocked, face tinged with just the slightest dusting of red. He dropped his eyes, fingers twisting together nervously as he grit out, *"Anch'io ti amo."*

Antonio smiled wildly, feeling warmth flood his chest at the words. He wrapped Lovino in a tight hug before swiftly pulling away. There was still that lingering sense of hopeless held him hostage, but at least he still held Lovino's unwavering affection.

"I'll be home in a few hours, I swear on my life." Antonio called over his shoulder as he marched his way quickly to the door.

Lovino crossed his arms, although he couldn't quite stop the smile on his face as he said, "I'm holding you to that, bastard. I'm making pasta tonight, don't be late."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world." Antonio said sincerely, sparing one last glance at the Italian before turning away. It was heartening to hear that Lovino was going to pull himself out of bed, even if it was to simply make dinner. The stinging bite of loss still gripped the both of them, and they may very well be homeless by the end of the week, but at the end of the day, they still had each other.

Maybe there's hope for us yet.

Antonio smiled more genuinely than he had in days, moving with a renewed bounce in his step. He sped his way out the door, hoping to find out what Gilbert wanted and return home as fast as he possibly could. After all, he didn't want to be late for dinner.

Chapter End Notes

Ayyyo, I spent a long time on this one, so I hope y'all like it!

Anyways, thanks so much for reading, this story is hella angsty (I hope you knew what you signed up for lmao). Wonder what Gilbert's up to, hmmm?? Also, spamano fluff? Hell ye.

A few translations today:

Amor - Love (term of endearment)
Tesoro - Treasure (also term of endearment)
Te amo, mi vida - I love you, my life (mi vida is yet another term of endearment - go figure)
Anch'io ti amo - I love you, too

Okie dokie, that's all I got! Let me know what y'all think, I love talking to you guys in the comments :)

Love y'all, bye!

'Till next time

Chapter 46

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Antonio kept his uneasy gaze fixed out the window of the car, fingers tapping restlessly on his leg as the world blurred messily together. The sun was shining with all the intensity of a bright summer's day — even if they were well and truly in the midst of autumn — and Antonio wondered if this would be the last day of warmth before winter started marching dutifully in.

The city was quickly disappearing behind them, Gilbert tearing down the road just a little too quickly for comfort. True to his word, the albino had been sitting in his car outside the apartment waiting to whisk Antonio away to *God knows where.*

Antonio turned his head to glare at the obnoxious man, irritated that he still had no idea where they were going. However, Gilbert seemed quite content to leave him in the dark, instead choosing to hum along to the radio as he completely ignored the Spaniard in his passenger seat.

With a slight huff of annoyance, Antonio cleared his throat to get the German's attention. Gilbert turned to glance at him with a questioning look, and Antonio could hold his silence no longer, "Are you going to tell me where we're going?"

Gilbert smirked that irritating smile of his and turned his eyes back to the road, "Nope!"

"And why not?" he asked, gaze darkening ever more.

The albino shrugged, "You'll ask too many questions, you'll just have to wait and see."

Antonio crossed his arms, a heated scowl overtaking his features, "I think I'm entitled to ask questions, especially if there's something wrong."

Gilbert let the smirk slowly fall away into something a bit more subdued, "I mean, everything's wrong right now, isn't it?"

"That doesn't-"

"I told you that you're gonna have to trust me and I meant it." Gilbert said seriously, finally sparing a glance over to the passenger side.

Antonio searched those startling red eyes, shocked to find only sincerity there. He didn't know how much trust he was willing to put in him, but honestly Gilbert had been a dependable person thus far. Lovino trusted the obnoxious albino (not that he'd ever admit it), and Antonio didn't take that lightly — after all, it had taken an embarrassingly long amount of time for even *him* to gain his stubborn boyfriend's trust.

Either way, Antonio supposed he wasn't left with much of an option, so with a long-suffering sigh he grit out a tense, "Fine."

"That's what I like to hear!" Gilbert shouted, turning off the main road and into a rather upscale-looking neighborhood.

Each house looked expensive, although that did nothing to diminish the inviting aura that surrounded the lavish community. There were a few families walking down the sidewalk, many of them offering friendly waves which Antonio shyly returned.

The car winded through the identical houses, and Antonio was growing increasingly anxious. These people definitely had money, and he felt profoundly out of place, "Seriously, where are we going?"

Gilbert groaned loudly in annoyance, "Dude."

"Well I'm sorry that I want to know where the hell we're going after I was dragged out of bed by *someone,"* here Antonio sent a pointed glare at the albino, "who wouldn't stop blowing up my phone!"

Gilbert ran a hand through his hair, "It's like one in the afternoon, why were you still in bed?"

Antonio breathed in deeply, praying for patience, "In case you haven't noticed, our lives are falling apart."

Gilbert nodded in apparent agreement, "And I'm trying to fix that, which is why I can't have you moping around in bed all day!"

"Y'know, it's not that easy." Antonio growled, glaring down at his hands. "I don't expect you to understand, but it's pretty hard to get out of bed when you're about to be evicted because your boyfriend's too depressed to work."

Gilbert snapped his mouth shut, most likely aborting whatever retort sat at the tip of his tongue. Instead, he glanced seriously over at Antonio, "How long?"

"How… long?" Antonio asked in confusion.

"When are you getting evicted, how long?" Gilbert asked with a touch of exasperation.

Antonio sighed heavily, trying to think it through. They were already behind on their rent by an entire week, and it wasn't about to be paid any time soon. He had tried to work out a deal with the landlord, but it was proving pretty futile. Legally, their landlord had every right to evict them in as little as a few days, although they had yet to receive a written notice yet. However, Antonio had shared some rather harsh emails back and forth, and judging from what was said, they had a week and half tops.

Antonio groaned in distress, deflating in his seat as he turned his gaze back to the pristine houses outside, "Two weeks — and that's if we're lucky."

Gilbert chewed on his lip, still weaving his way through the winding streets, “Shit, how much do you need?”

“We’re short six hundred.” Antonio said, feeling hopelessness hollow out his chest once more.

Gilbert shook his head, pulling the car up along the curb outside a large house. However, instead of kicking the door, he turned to grab something from the back seat, “Well, I don’t have six hundred-” he turned back around, handing Antonio a wrinkled envelope with a jaded smile, “-but I do have this.”

Antonio took the envelope curiously, “What is it?”

“Ludwig gave it to me, said it was from Feli.” Gilbert said softly.

“What?” Antonio asked with wide eyes, turning his gaze back to the envelope in his hands. It had already been a week since Feliciano had run, and this was the closest thing to communication that he’s gotten out of the teen.

The envelope wasn’t sealed, so with a shaky hand Antonio opened it to reveal its contents. Inside sat two checks, both of them made out for two hundred dollars, “How did he-”

“He still has his job.” Gilbert explained. “Although Ludwig tells me he has to sneak out in order to work, so this is probably a pretty risky operation he’s got going on.”

“O-oh.” Antonio said shakily, heart filled with conflicting emotions. There was just a touch of confusion in his head because he knew this was more than a week’s pay — but then again, Feliciano had probably been stashing checks until he had a chance to go to the bank.

But how did he know we were in trouble?

Antonio shook his head, realizing that they had always been on the brink of destitution. Plus, Feliciano had always concerned himself with problems that no teenager his age should have. But what really ate at Antonio’s heart was the fact that the teen was risking his own wellbeing for their sake. Cristiano was nothing if not controlling, and if Feliciano really was sneaking out then there’d be hell to pay if he was caught.

“You think you can get the other two hundred?” Gilbert asked suddenly, cutting through his silent musing.

Antonio nodded slowly, “I get paid in two days. If we can hang on until then, we’ll make it.”

“Awesome.” Gilbert breathed in relief.

“Yeah.” Antonio choked out, wiping away a few wayward tears. He was about to fold the envelope back up and shove it in his pocket when he noticed another slip of paper peeking out from behind the checks. He pulled it free, staring at it blankly when he realized what it was.

A note.

It was short and the hurried handwriting looked shaky. There were only a few words scribbled down, but it was enough to make Antonio feel heavy with despair:

I'm really sorry it has to be this way, please don't hate me.

I love you both, and I hope this helps.

The note wasn't signed, but it didn't need to be. It felt too much like a goodbye, and Antonio had to shove it back in the envelope or risk breaking down. Gilbert watched sadly from the side, clapping a heavy hand on his shoulder, "If it makes you feel any better, my brother is keeping a really close eye on him at school."

Antonio looked up, something akin to hope in his eyes, "Is he okay?"

The way Gilbert's lips twitched downwards wasn't promising, "More or less, but we can talk about that later. I still have someone I'd like you to meet."

"Okay." Antonio mumbled, shoving the envelope in his pocket as he tried to shake that horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach.

The two exited the car and began their trek up to a sizeable white house. There was a winding stone path leading up to the front door, flowers (that were probably once beautiful, but now wilted by the chill autumn air) lining the pathway. The house itself was large, but not excessive. The windows were the most pronounced features, the curtains inside blown wide open to let in the sun's warm rays.

They made their way up to the entrance, Gilbert knocking on the door in an upbeat little rhythm before sitting back on his heels to wait for somebody to answer.

Antonio continued to scrutinize the building as he waited for an answer. He couldn't quite see in through the window, but he did notice what looked like a crayon-drawing taped crudely against the glass. Antonio looked down curiously, noticing that there was a jumbled mess of chalk scribbles on the concrete below him.

There's a kid here?

The sudden sound of thundering footsteps approaching the door is what broke Antonio from his rumination. The energetic running sounded like a mini-stampede, and the door was suddenly whipped open with a hopeful call of: "Matthias?"

"Not quite, kiddo." Gilbert said with a warm smile, kneeling down to get an eye-level with the boy who had answered the door.

"Gil!" the kid yelled excitedly, launching himself at the albino. He couldn't have been older than ten or eleven, and even that was pushing it. He had dirty blond hair, and some of the brightest blue eyes Antonio had ever seen.

Gilbert caught him wrapping him in a swift hug, "How ya doin', squirt?"

"Very well, thank you." was the polite response, a distinct british accent coloring his words.

“Awesome.” Gilbert said with a toothy grin. “This is my friend Toni, we’re here to see your dad.”

The boy sidestepped Gilbert and stuck his hand out, “Hullo! My name’s Peter.”

Antonio looked on with wide eyes, still reeling from the sudden flurry of activity. Peter was like a whirlwind, his childlike enthusiasm shocking Antonio into shaking his hand with a bewildered, “Nice to meet you.”

Gilbert cackled at the awkward introduction, addressing Peter once more, “So do you think you could go get your dad for us?”

Peter stood up ramrod straight, giving a mock salute, “Right on it!”

The excitable boy turned on his heel and shot into the house, leaving Gilbert and Antonio to stand in the doorway with varying levels of bemusement.

Antonio shook his head, hearing a vague shout coming from inside the house. Everything had happened so quickly, but he was slowly adjusting. Peter’s innocence was like a breath of fresh air, momentarily cutting through the cloud of depression that clung to Antonio. It was refreshing, and he could feel himself smile after the boy, “Nice kid.”

Gilbert turned to him, his smile decidedly more jaded than it was before, “Really nice kid. He was one of mine.”

“One of yours?” Antonio asked in confusion.

Gilbert nodded with a light glare, “Had to remove him from his home, his parents were unfit.”

Antonio audibly gulped, uncomfortable with the thought that somebody would ever want to harm such a sweet boy. Then again, he had seen firsthand how cruel people could be to children, but he was curious: “So who does he live with now?”

“C’mon, hurry up!” Peter shouted impatiently, inadvertently answering Antonio’s question by dragging a tall blond behind him.

“No need t’rush, ‘m right beh’nd ya.” mumbled the blond, reaching his hand up to straighten his glasses.

The two finally made it to the doorway, Peter standing in front of the bespectacled man with his chest puffed out proudly. The tall blond cast a critical eye over the two in the doorway, although there was a spark of recognition when he saw Gilbert.

But the albino made no move to introduce Antonio to the new figure, instead turning to Peter with a smirk, “I think you grabbed the wrong dad, kiddo.”

The wrong dad?

Antonio was getting more confused by the second, but he pushed down the questions that sat on his tongue in lieu of listening to Peter, whose nose had scrunched up in confusion, “I don’t have another dad, though.”

“You’re here f’r Tino?” the man suddenly asked, towering over the small boy in front of him.

Gilbert nodded, “Sure am!”

“Oh, well you should have just said so!” Peter suddenly shouted, turning on his heel to race down the hallway, “Mum! Gil’s here to see you and he brought a friend!”

Antonio’s eyebrows shot up and to his side he could hear Gilbert choke on a poorly-contained bark of laughter. He pushed a hand to his mouth, but was helpless to contain the amused exclamation of, “Mum?” that broke free.

The blond also quirked his eyebrow up at Gilbert’s outburst, but nevertheless stepped aside to invite them in. His face remained immovable throughout it all, and Antonio could honestly say that he was just a tad intimidated by the man.

The interior of the house was inviting, everything looking meticulously cared for. The large windows served their purpose in allowing the lustrous sunshine in, the dark hardwood flooring offering a warm contrast to the bright lighting. There were various toys and cute little drawings scattered around, adding a quality of homeliness that made the house feel well-loved. It was impossibly domestic, even a line of shoes sitting at the ready next to the doormat.

Gilbert kicked his shoes off, Antonio following his lead when Peter came bounding back. This time, he was dragging a smaller man with platinum blond hair behind him, “Peter, not so fast!”

“But there’s a new guest here that wants to meet you, mum!” Peter called brightly, once again skidding to a halt in front of the bemused guests .

The man rolled his eyes fondly, pushing a warm smile on his face as he addressed his guests, “Welcome to the circus, did you bring your tickets?”

“But this isn’t a circus…” Peter mumbled confusedly under his breath.

The man patted him lightly on the head, “Just a metaphor, hon.”

Gilbert shook his head, his shoulders hitching up in barely-restrained laughter as he pushed Antonio in front of him, “This is Antonio, and he’ll be my ticket today.”

“Hi.” Antonio said meekly, still reeling from the flurry of activity all around him.

The man rolled his eyes once more, “I guess I’ll let you in this time, loudmouth.”

“I told you to stop calling me that.” Gilbert muttered.

He was ignored, “My name’s Tino, and that’s my husband Berwald.” Tino gestured to the other blond watching apathetically from the side. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

They shook hands, Antonio mumbling out a soft, “Likewise.”

“Are you in trouble?” Peter yelled as he forced his way between the two.

Antonio looked at him, completely dumbstruck, “What?”

“Peter, be nice.” Tino reprimanded, pulling the boy gently to the side as he tried to usher him away.

Peter jut his lip out in a defined pout “But the only people who come to see you are always in trouble.”

Tino sighed, turning to Berwald with a pleading look, “Why don’t you two go out and play?”

“Oh, we can surprise Matthias when he gets here!” Peter exclaimed excitedly, already pulling the stoic blond by the hand out of the room. Berwald let himself be dragged, offering a short wave as they disappeared around the corner.

The silence left in the wake of the young boy’s departure was deafening, and Antonio could do little more than stand in shock.

What just happened?

Tino sighed loudly, although that smile didn’t budge as he gestured for his guests to follow him, “Sorry for all the noise, it’s been a bit of a zoo here lately.”

Gilbert snorted, “I thought it was a circus.”

“Same thing.” Tino muttered, leading the duo deeper into the house and into what looked like some sort of home office.

There was yet another large window in the room, this one overlooking the backyard where Antonio saw Peter running circles around Berwald. The office itself looked like an explosion of documents and manila folders, stacks of paper piled high on every surface. There was a desk in the middle of the chaos with two chairs sitting directly in front of it. Tino sat heavily behind the desk, motioning silently to the chairs in front of him. Antonio sat delicately on his own chair, watching in amusement as Gilbert all but collapsed in his.

The albino was smiling widely, craning his neck to look out the window, “I see Peter’s adjusting well, *mum.”*

Tino rubbed at his eyes, but he was obviously amused by the whole ordeal, “Remarkably well, really. Some days are better than others, but he’s getting there.”

Gilbert smirked, “So I take it you’ve told him then?”

Tino twisted around to watch the boy play, an impossibly happy smile on his face, “Yeah, a few days ago.”

“Awesome, he deserves a good home.” Gilbert said with a nod of approval.

Antonio watched silently from his seat, still having absolutely no idea what was going on, “Sorry, um, what exactly am I doing here again?”

Tino jumped, whipping back around to face the confused Spaniard, “I’m sorry, I forgot to introduce myself properly — you must be so confused!”

“Just a bit.” Antonio mumbled in exasperation, fixing Gilbert with a glare.

“Hey, don’t look at me like that!” the albino yelled defensively.

But before Antonio could tell the German off for the less-than-courteous way he had dragged him there, Tino jumped in, “I’m Lovino’s attorney, and I need to talk about a few things with you.”

Antonio froze, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. He tore his gaze away from where he had been glaring at Gilbert to truly look at the unassuming blond, *“You’re* Lovi’s lawyer?”

Tino laughed softly, relaxing into his chair, “I know, I don’t look like it, do I?”

He shook his head, “No, it’s not that.” While it may be true that Tino really didn’t look like the type to be in such a, for lack of a better term, *combative* profession, that’s not why Antonio was shocked to meet him, “It’s just, Lovi’s been trying to get ahold of you for days.”

Actually, Lovino had been desperate to speak to Tino. He had cried until his voice was raw about how he needed to drop the case before his brother got hurt. Apparently Cristiano had given him a cruel ultimatum the day he got out of jail, so meeting Tino now of all times was actually quite the shock.

The blond looked a bit sheepish, shooting Gilbert a guilty look before turning back to the Spaniard, “Yeah, that’s one of the things we need to talk about.”

Antonio settled down in his chair with a sigh, anticipating a lengthy discussion ahead of them. He gestured vaguely with his hand, motioning for Tino to jump into it.

He obliged, “So I need you to tell me a few things about Lovino and his brother.”

“What about?” Antonio asked curiously.

Tino reached for one of the many manila folders scattered on his desk. “What do you know of their family?”

“Their family?” Antonio breathed, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

Which family?

As far as Antonio was concerned, the only real family that the two brothers had besides each other was their late grandfather. Their mother was long gone, and their father could burn in hell for all Antonio cared.

He pushed a hand through his hair, shrugging as he addressed Tino once more, “They had a grandfather, but he died a few months ago. Besides their asshole father, there’s nobody else.”

“Nobody?” Tino’s eyebrow quirked upwards.

Antonio shook his head, “Not that I know of.”

Gilbert took that as his opportunity to jump in, “What about at the funeral? Surely there was family there?”

Antonio thought back to that dreary day, remembering the rain and how cold it had felt. There hadn’t really been that many attendees at the funeral, and he didn’t remember either brother really talking to anyone with any kind of familiarity. Lovino had remarked that most of the funeral-goers had been business partners or old acquaintances, but nobody had been labelled as *family* — their mother hadn’t even shown up to pay her respects to her own father.

“I guess not.” Antonio breathed, his heart twisting painfully as he suddenly realized that the brothers really were all alone in the world. It was no wonder Lovino was so broken over losing the only real family he had left.

Tino sighed, “What do you know of their mother?”

Antonio pursed his lips thoughtfully, trying to recall what their mother had been like. He had only seen her once, but he remembered her being a pleasant enough woman. But she had walked out on her family very shortly after Antonio had moved in next door, “I don’t remember her much, but I know that she left when Lovi and Feli were still kids.”

“Thought so.” Tino muttered, suddenly looking exhausted. “What was their relationship like with her?”

Antonio shrugged, “I know she’s part of the reason why Lovi has trust issues, but other than that, I have no clue.”

Gilbert’s foot started tapping nervously on the ground, scarlet eyes downcast, “I’ve been looking for her.”

“Really?” Antonio asked in shock.

Tino nodded slowly, eyes softening as he said delicately, “We found her.”

“Are you serious?” Antonio breathed. To say he was surprised was gross understatement. She had apparently left years ago, disappearing without a trace. Feliciano had only ever mentioned her a few times, and Lovino outright refused to talk about her. “Where is she?”

Gilbert growled wordlessly, crossing his arms as he turned in a huff, “Nowhere.”

Antonio's breath caught in his throat, "What are you saying?"

Tino dug around in the folder before pulling out what looked like a newspaper article. He slid it over his desk, pushing it closer to Antonio.

He craned his neck to read what it said, thankful that his years spent in Italy had given him the necessary language skills to be able to read the writing. He squinted at the article, eyes finding their mother's name quickly: *Elena Valenti.* Antonio noticed a picture of the woman, expression harsh but with an underlying quality of softness that betrayed her. It reminded Antonio briefly of Lovino, and he shifted his eyes to the text beneath the picture. He read slowly, his Italian being just a bit rusty, when he noticed something disturbing. Suddenly the dots connected, and he was recoiling violently away.

This wasn't just a newspaper article.

It was an obituary.

Antonio clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his gasp of horror, wide eyes snapping up to meet Tino's sympathetic ones.

She's dead?

"Elena Valenti, dead at age thirty-six." Gilbert spat, tone positively dripping in aggravation.

Tino sighed, "She died in a car crash, although there's some mystery surrounding her death."

"Oh, Dios." Antonio felt like he was going to be sick, hunching over in his seat as he cradled his head in his hands. He didn't know if he really wanted the answer, but he grit out anyway, "Mystery about her death?"

"The fucking tires were slashed." Gilbert huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "No suspects, no arrests."

The albino was obviously irritated by that fact, but Antonio was still trying to grapple with the new information, "Does Lovi know?"

Tino pulled the article away, tucking it back into the folder, "We were hoping you could tell us that."

Antonio ran a shaky hand through his hair, feeling close to tears, "I don't think either of them know, but I'm not sure."

When Lovino had broken down the previous night, he had said something about how his mother had left. Not died, but *left.* The phrasing indicated that he really thought that their mother had just walked out on them, and if Lovino didn't know the truth, then there was absolutely no way that Feliciano knew.

Gilbert clapped a hand on his shoulder, and Antonio realized with a start that he had started silently crying. The albino looked straight ahead, eyes fixed on the wall ahead of him, "If we tell Lovino, will this break him?"

Antonio swiped at his eyes, having wondered that question himself. It was seldom if ever that Lovino spoke of his past at all, his hysteric ranting last night being a rarity. There was really no telling how he'd react to the news, but one thing was for certain: "He's already broken."

Tino shook his head, lips pressed in a firm line, "Am I part of the reason why?"

Antonio nodded grimly, "Why have you been avoiding him?"

"Well," Tino started nervously, "Gil asked me to keep the case alive, and unfortunately the only way to do that was to stop accepting calls."

"What?" Antonio breathed, whipping his head to fix Gilbert with an imploring gaze, "This is your fault?"

Gilbert bit at his lip nervously before saying, "I couldn't let him abandon his brother."

Antonio shook his head, feeling the beginnings of anger pick at his insides, "Did you not think to ask Lovi first?"

"We both know what he would've said, I had no choice." Gilbert crossed his arms defensively.

"That's no excuse." Antonio growled, the searing feeling of rage growing ever more in his chest. "Do you have any idea what you've done?

Gilbert glared, looking wholly unapologetic, "Yeah, I kept Lovino from throwing everything away."

Antonio shook his head, hands shaking as his breathing went shallow, "You have no clue how much Lovino hates himself because of this."

"And I'm sorry about that, but I can't let his inaction be the reason that Feli gets hurt." Gilbert growled, shoulders scrunching up defensively at the sudden vitriol in the Spaniard's voice.

The way he sounded so flippant about the situation only served to piss Antonio off even more. While he hadn't really agreed with Lovino's decision to drop the case in the first place, he understood why he needed to. At the very least, they needed to be cautious about what they did next in order to keep Feliciano safe. But Gilbert hadn't even thought to ask *why* the case had to be dropped, too convinced in his own self-righteousness.

His actions are going to get Feli hurt.

That thought caused Antonio to launch right out of his seat, "You have no idea the hell you're talking about!"

Gilbert stood as well, meeting Antonio's fierce glare with one of his own, "Look, I know Lovino was blackmailed with something — he's scared, I get it — but I know we can win this if he just sucks it up and *works with us here!"*

Tino was suddenly between them, pushing Gilbert forcibly down in his chair, “You will *not* fight in my office.”

Antonio scoffed, looking directly over Tino’s head to growl at the albino, “He wasn’t blackmailed, you ass. He was given an ultimatum.”

The glare on Gilbert’s face began to soften, his expression looking increasingly unsure, “Ultimatum?”

“Sit down, now.” Tino said firmly, trying to physically push Antonio back in his seat. “There’s a child running around here, and I will not have you fighting in my house.”

Antonio grumbled, but sat down. He still had his hands balled up in fists, but Tino seemed confident that he wouldn’t try anything because he leaned back against the desk. The lawyer shook his head, “Now, *calmly* explain what you mean by ‘ultimatum’.”

“His father beat the shit out of him in an alleyway.” Antonio instantly snarled, sending another harsh glare Gilbert’s way. “When he was done with that, he told Lovi to either drop the case or Feliciano was going to get hurt.”

Gilbert looked like he was going to be sick, squeezing his eyes shut guiltily, “Shit.”

Antonio laughed wryly,“Lovi’s *‘inaction’* was going to protect Feli, but now he’s suffering because of *you.”*

Tino looked just as guilty, but he was able to say calmly, “That doesn’t mean we should drop the case, making threats like that is a crime.”

“Do you think Cristiano gives a shit?” Antonio asked seriously, “Because I don’t think he does.”

Gilbert was still looking a little woozy, his foot tapping wildly on the ground as he said, “We should have expected something like this to happen, and it’s terrible, but I agree with Tino.”

“Of course you do.” Antonio seethed. “You’re not the one with family on the line, so excuse me for feeling just a *little* protective.”

“I’m trying to protect Feli too!” Gilbert implored, leaning forward in his seat in an attempt to relay his sincerity. “But if you think giving into Cristiano’s demands is really going to help, then you’re fucking crazy dude.”

Antonio groaned in distress, “What do you want me to do, then? Just let him be hurt?”

Surprisingly, it was Tino who offered an answer, “The only way you’d let him get hurt is by giving up.”

Antonio floundered for some kind of retort. It wasn’t like they were just giving up, right? That couldn’t be true… but they were technically giving into Cristiano’s demands — Cristiano, one of the most dishonest, disgusting people that Antonio had ever met. But what else were they supposed to do?

“Look,” Gilbert said wearily, “I know this is a no-win situation, but if we can get everyone on board then we can have Feli back by Christmas. If we do things your way, then we lose him for years.”

Antonio shook his head, knowing in his heart that it was true. He gripped at his chest, feeling a searing pain there when he realized that the teen was going to suffer because of this. But, as Gilbert had said, if they give up then they lose him for years. There was no option that didn’t entail pain and misery, but there was one way to ensure that it would be short-lived.

“Fuck.” he breathed, burying his head in his hands.

Tino walked forward to put a comforting hand on his shoulder, “If it makes you feel better, we found out something that could change everything.”

“Will it make it better?” Antonio asked dejectedly, turning his watery eyes up to gaze pleadingly at the lawyer.

“It might.” Gilbert breathed.

“We figured out why Cristiano is trying to take custody.” Tino said, suddenly energized once more as he marched to the back of his desk.

Antonio didn’t know if he had it in him to feel hopeful, but he gestured wordlessly for Tino to continue on.

He gladly obliged, “Romulus Vargas, an extremely wealthy founder and owner of a major wine company.” Tino was pulling out yet another folder full of documents, “I’m going to guess that he never revealed it until it was too late, but he was terminally ill.”

Antonio nodded, remembering the way the man seemed to slowly waste away over the years, “The first time any of us knew he was sick was the day he was hospitalised. He died a week later.”

Tino nodded sympathetically, “A little over six months ago, correct?”

With a pang, Antonio realized that it really had been that long already. It didn’t feel like it, but at the same time it felt like they had been on their own for years, “Yeah, that sounds right.”

“He left a will.” Tino said shortly, looking through a pile of what looked like hand-written notes.

Antonio’s eyes widened, “He did?”

Gilbert snorted, “Dude, the guy was like stupid rich. Of course he left a will.”

“Yeah, but-”

“Neither Feliciano nor Lovino were ever informed, right?” Tino asked seriously.

“I don’t think so.” Antonio said softly, thinking back to the day Roma had died. It was a flurry of grief and anger, but there had never been a will mentioned.

“That’s what I thought.” Tino huffed as he crossed his arms. “Something sketchy has been going on, but I was able to speak to some of their grandfather’s lawyers — granted it took a while since I can’t speak Italian.”

“What are you saying?” Antonio asked carefully, not daring to feel hope in fear of being let down once again.

“We’re saying,” Gilbert started slowly, although his eyes were bright with excitement, “that Lovino is officially heir to Roma’s business — *a multi-million dollar company,* dude!”

No way.

Antonio was shocked into silence, unable to grasp what he was just told. He looked to Tino, searching for evidence that this was some kind of cruel joke, but he found only sincerity there.

Multi… million…

“I-I… wha-...” Antonio cleared his throat, “Are you serious?”

“Completely.” Tino said with a soft smile, but he still looked a bit apprehensive.

“Oh.” Antonio breathed, deflating into his seat as the information swirled around his head.

He’s heir to the entire company, and we were never told about it?

That didn’t sit well with Antonio, and he leaned forward as he waited for the other shoe to drop.

It finally did when Tino rubbed tiredly at his eyes, “Feliciano has a sizable inheritance as well.”

“And?” Antonio prompted, knowing that there was more.

Tino cleared his throat, fiddling idly with some of the papers in his hands, “He actually inherited one of the main vineyards. It was the place that Roma lived before he moved away.”

Antonio nodded, remembering that place well. Feliciano had adored the farm, going on and on about how excited he was to visit when he was a child. The teen had said, even now, that he would love to go back — the place being a source of comfort and peace for him.

Tino plowed ahead, ignorant of Antonio’s wistful musing, “While Lovino inherited the business, the vineyard is the base of operations for the entire company.”

Antonio looked at him curiously, “So who controls the vineyard controls the company?”

“Right on, dude.” Gilbert muttered under his breath.

“Yes, so it stands to reason that Roma wanted to ensure that they got a fairly equal cut.” Tino nodded to himself, glancing down at some of his notes. “One controls the internal operations, while the other handles the business aspect of things.”

Antonio’s head was swirling from all the business terms, but he had a fairly good grasp as to what was going on, “Okay, sure. But I’m not seeing the issue here.”

“The issue is that Feliciano is sixteen.” Tino said shortly.

“And?” Antonio asked.

Gilbert was glaring at the wall again, “You need to be eighteen to inherit something like that, otherwise it goes to the legal guardian.”

Tino nodded, “And if Cristiano has control of Feliciano…”

“Then he has control of the vineyard.” Antonio breathed, beginning to feel queasy.

“Which means he’ll take over the company, and probably coerce Feli into signing away his inheritance.” Gilbert grumbled.

“Oh.”

Oh no.

Antonio deflated, “What do we do?”

“Well I’ll tell you what you don’t do-” Gilbert began loudly, but he was cut off.

“You don’t give up.” Tino said with finality, fixing Antonio with a serious look.

Antonio looked between the two of them, feeling the intensity of their gazes. There was a lot at stake here, and he could feel the pressure mounting. It was obvious why they had chosen to reveal this to Antonio and not Lovino. It was because he was the only one who could get through to the obstinate Italian, and as the staring persisted, he knew what he was being asked to do.

“Okay.” Antonio whispered, finally allowing an inkling of hope blossom in his heart. “I won’t give up. What do you need me to do next?”

Chapter End Notes

ooooooOOOOh BaBY! Finally, we have a motive for all the creepin around and crap

Lol, hope it wasn't disappointing, but I was so excited to reveal it. Also, y'all have been begging for more Tino in the comments (like damn XD) so HERE YOU GO

Also, you can't tell me that Gilbert's not great with kids (that loser is a child himself). Also Peter is a joy, like holy crap I love that child - also, would like to mention that the 'unfit parents' thing has nothing to do with Arthur (yes, I realize that Peter's last name is Kirkland, but please humor me here!)

Anyways, I really hoped you liked this. A lot was revealed, and the plot just keeps getting more complicated lol. Let me know what ya think!

Okie, that's it. Love you all, stay safe!

'Till next time

Chapter 47

Chapter Notes

Hey y'all, this one gets a bit graphic... please tread carefully.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Feliciano hadn’t meant to sneak out. Really, he had gone to the library with every intention of quitting, but he had quickly lost complete control of the situation the moment he walked into the building.

It was Sunday, meaning it had been a little over a week since he had run, and his homelife had deteriorated even more (truly an impressive feat given it had already been abysmal). His one safe haven had been school, even if things were still incredibly awkward around his art teacher — the man still asked him questions like he *knew.* But Feliciano could deal with it, after all he knew he had someone to share his fears and anxieties with now.

He let the smallest of smiles overtake his face, enjoying the peace of the barren streets as he raced by the soft glow of the streetlights. There was a bitter wind that cut through him, but he welcomed the piercing feeling — the breeze feeling like freedom across his skin. Feliciano had only shared the most basic information with Ludwig, but just that was enough to lessen at least part of the burden that rested heavily on his shoulders.

With a quiet sigh of contentment, Feliciano picked up the pace until he was nearly running. He had to get back to the house he shared with his father (he outright refused to call that place a home), and he had to get there soon. His shift had kept him out particularly late that night, and he was getting nervous. Feliciano had gone to the library a handful of days ago to announce his resignation, but the moment he had walked in, Roderich had put him straight to work.

I couldn’t even get a word out.

His boss had been stressed out — he was always stressed out, but that was beside the point — and his eyes had lit up when he saw the teen walk in:

“Ah, Feliciano, just who I wanted to see.” Roderich said as he marched up to the nervous teen.

Feliciano jumped, hands fidgeting nervously before him as he said, “I’m sorry, I know I’m late, but I can’t-”

“Yes, you are late.” Roderich said with a light glare. “Normally that would be unforgivable, but there’s simply too much to do.”

Feliciano tried to talk over the uptight man, "That's what I need to talk to you about-"

"Here, you forgot to take this last time." Roderich huffed, shoving an envelope into his hands.

The teen looked at it with wide eyes, suddenly remembering the other check he had stashed in his bag too, "Thanks, but-"

"Now, get to work. There's a cart of books that needs to be put away over there." here the librarian pointed at a cart overflowing with returned books.

Feliciano shook his head, trying once more to get through to him, "I-I can't, I have to-"

But Roderich was already ushering him away, "Once you're done with that, I have some cleaning for you to do."

"But-"

"Not a moment to waste, get to it." Roderich said sternly, turning on his heel to disappear with a huff.

Feliciano put his head down in resignation, "Yes, sir."

Ever since then, Feliciano had been showing up to work regularly. He had convinced Roderich to let him work short, two or three hour shifts, but that meant that he was asked to come in more frequently. It was risky, but Feliciano was having a hard time mustering up the courage to quit — the fact that he had convinced Ludwig to relay the checks to his brother only fed his desire to stay.

The new lady today was so nice, too.

As far as he knew, Elizabeta was only there to visit Roderich. However, the woman had been so sweet, taking the time to speak with Feliciano as he dutifully returned the books to their shelves. He remembered her soft smile and teasing antics, the utter kindness shown to him from the woman feeling almost foreign to him now. Feliciano suddenly felt his breath hitch as he was reminded briefly of his mother, but he quickly buried the thought before he could linger on it.

Elizabeta had been kind, but the strangest part of the encounter was the way she seemed to recognize him. Feliciano couldn't exactly explain what that meant, but the woman had spoken to him with some level of familiarity that perplexed him.

I don't think I've ever met her before.

With a shrug, Feliciano decided that it wasn't worth his time to agonize over it. After all, he had too much to stress over as it was.

Like the fact that he was back.

His shoulders jumped up to his ears at the sudden tension he felt, praying that Cristiano wouldn't notice his return. Feliciano had absolutely no idea how he had managed to stay undetected thus far, but each time he went out he knew that he was pushing his luck just a little further. His father had yet to notice his absence, and Feliciano supposed that that could be attributed to the fact that Cristiano had all but ordered him to stay out of sight.

'Let me be clear, I don't want to even know you exist when you're in this house.' is what Cristiano had said.

It was fine by Feliciano, but he knew that even if it was unlikely that his father would notice his absence, it was still a profound risk to his own wellbeing. Cristiano spent most of the time smoking or drinking like the deadbeat he was, and that usually aided Feliciano in his nightly escapades.

But it makes him more dangerous, too.

Feliciano had to suppress the shudder that ran up his spine as memories from his childhood raced through his head. Cristiano was unpredictable when he was drunk, but so far he had been able to avoid his ire.

At the thought, Feliciano rubbed absently at his upper arm. He had been grabbed rather harshly once again, although the bruise had mostly healed. It was time for him to sneak back into the house, and he instantly rushed his way towards the back door. That particular door was almost always unlocked, and it was a big reason why he had remained concealed in his (decidedly bold) actions.

He made his way to the backyard, ducking under the windows in an attempt to stay out of sight. He padded up to the door and pressed an ear against it, listening closely for any sound coming from inside the house. Once he was satisfied that the coast was clear, he turned to doorknob and tried to push it open.

Only, it didn't work.

It's locked?

The back door was never locked, and Feliciano could feel dread work his way to settle heavily in his chest. He tried the door once more, knowing full well that his actions were in vain.

Oh Dio, what do I do?

His thoughts floundered to come up with another viable option to sneak in, but he knew from experience that all the windows were locked. Feliciano could feel his heart rate pick up when he realized that he was left with only one option.

The front door.

He audibly gulped, sneaking his way around to the front of the house. Going through the front door meant he had to walk directly past the living room. Cristiano was almost always

sitting in front of the television — another reason it had been so easy to sneak out the back. He would have to walk right by him, and with a pang Feliciano realized that his chances of avoiding that horrible man were now slim to none.

His hands were shaking as he reached out to turn the handle, finding to his great relief (and profound unease), that the door was unlocked. Feliciano pushed it open cautiously, cringing when there was the faintest creaking sound. He feared his heart may explode as he stepped foot inside the house, taking great care to noiselessly shut the door behind him.

Feliciano simply stood in the entrance, straining to hear any sign of life. The sound of the television playing faintly just ahead filled him with a freezing sense of foreboding. Feliciano had known that his father would be sitting in front of the television, the fact doing nothing to diminish the sudden feeling of nausea as butterflies exploded in his stomach.

Holding a shaky hand to his stomach, Feliciano slipped his shoes off before taking a tentative step forward. It was imperative for him to stay silent, but the dreadful creaking of the floorboards was making that an impossible feat. The living room was just ahead, but he was having a difficult time forcing his body to move.

With a shuddering breath, Feliciano decided to just get it over with. He tiptoed down the hallway, now completely in the open. The living room was on his left, and he heard rather than saw the way somebody shifted on the couch.

He won't see me. He won't see me. He won't see me. He won't-

"What are you doing?"

Feliciano cringed, his shoulders scrunching up as his head whipped to the side and towards his father. Cristiano was glaring at him, his glossy eyes not detracting from the intimidating nature of the stare in the least bit. In fact, it only made him seem more fearsome. He was sitting on the couch, empty beer bottles scattered around him with a cigarette gripped loosely in his hand. His sharp amber eyes were glazed-over, a sure sign that he had been drinking. However, he wasn't nearly drunk enough to be harmless, and not at all sober enough to be reasonable.

This was a worst-case scenario.

Feliciano audibly gulped, "Just going to my room."

Cristiano seemed to contemplate that, eyes glazing over even further in thought before he was suddenly smirking, "How about you come sit down next to me instead?"

Feliciano's eyes went wide, looking apprehensively at the cigarette still smoldering in his hand, "Th-that's alright, I can just-"

"Sit." Cristiano growled, going so far as to scoot over to give his son space to sit.

There was no room for compromise in his voice, leaving Feliciano well and truly stuck in the last type of scenario he wanted to be in. The teen fidgeted with his hands as he made his way

slowly over, sitting gingerly on the couch. He tried to keep his eyes fixed on the floor, but he couldn't help but flinch when Cristiano threw an arm around him — the same arm that gripped his red-hot cigarette.

The man didn't say anything, the tension in the room growing so thick that Feliciano feared he may choke on it. The television still played in front of them, the cool glow bouncing off the walls in a way that was almost menacing. Cristiano kept his gaze fixed ahead even as he addressed his son, "It's funny, I got a call earlier today about you."

Feliciano was still chewing on his lip, his words coming out clumsily, "Y-yeah?"

"Yeah, said somethin' real interesting." Cristiano started fiddling with the cigarette that still hung loosely in his hand.

Feliciano eyed it warily, his heart thundering madly in his chest. For a split second he thought he was caught, that somehow his father had figured out that he was still sneaking out to go work at the library. He had half a mind to bolt out of the living room, but that grip on his shoulders held him firmly in place.

What do I do? He totally figured it out, and I'm stuck here, and-

But the panicked train of thought was cut off when Cristiano was suddenly *laughing* of all things. His shoulders hitched up in mirth, removing his arm from around the teen's shoulders in favor of taking a long drag from the cigarette. He blew the smoke right in Feliciano's face as he said, "Why so tense? I haven't even said anything yet."

Feliciano scrunched his nose up in discomfort, forcing himself not to react further as he stuttered, "O-oh, well I just-"

"Here," he leaned over to grab something, sitting back up with a wicked smile, "maybe this'll take the edge off."

Feliciano's back went rigid when he saw what he was being offered, breathing going shallow as his skin began to crawl. His father was trying to physically shove a cigarette into his hands, although it was blessedly unlit. The teen audibly gulped, completely frozen in place. He was still terrified of those awful things and the way they had burned, and that pungent stench, and the *searing pain,* and-

"Oh, I almost forgot." Cristiano cut off his near-panic as he stuck the cigarette in his own mouth and brought a lighter up to set it aflame. As soon as it was lit, he shoved it forcefully into Feliciano's hand.

The teen couldn't avoid his father this time around, and it was with great distress that he realized that he was holding a lit cigarette in his own hand. Feliciano held it out in front of him, as far away from his body as he possibly could. He was desperately trying to focus on anything other than the scorching heat that was practically at his fingertips, although it wasn't really working. The white paper was already beginning to curl as the flame smoldered, the fire creeping closer to his fingers where he *knew* he'd get burned, and it was going to hurt, and he *couldn't do this*-

“Woah, calm down.” Cristiano said flippantly, eyes sparkling in amusement. “You’re not really scared of these little things, are you?”

The words were cruel — this man knew damn-well that both his sons were still petrified of those *‘little things.’* Feliciano would have squeezed his eyes shut to try and avoid the terror that ripped through his being, but he didn’t dare take his eyes away from where that flame still creeped ever-closer towards his skin. He still held the cigarette at an arms-length, his chest heaving as he suddenly remembered how he got each and every one of his scars with startling clarity.

Oh Dio, why is he making me do this?

There had to be some kind of motive behind this twisted punishment — and it was a punishment, Feliciano knew the games his father liked to play well. But usually there was a reason behind his cruel actions, and it didn’t seem like he knew about his sneaking out.

So what is it?

Cristiano cleared his throat, taking a long drag before saying, “So about this call I got, I just thought it was so… *funny.”*

Feliciano dared a fleeting glance at his father, alarmed to note the way his face had twisted into an irritated glare. He was treading on thin ice, and Feliciano knew it was best for him to give a verbal answer, “W-what’s funny?”

“We have to work together here.” the greasy man clapped a menacing hand on the teen’s shoulder, “I’m trying very hard to get us home, but if you make me look bad then we’re in a bit of trouble now, aren’t we?”

Feliciano was nodding vehemently, willing to agree to anything just to get out of this situation. But despite how fear was completely clouding his thoughts, he could feel just a touch of relief when he noticed that the cigarette he was holding was about to fizzle out.

Unfortunately, Cristiano seemed to notice this as well, smirking evilly as he said, “You have to inhale it or else the flame will go out.”

Feliciano’s head whipped to the side, “I-I can’t-”

“Oh, but you can.” Cristiano said with a glare. “And you’re going to.”

This time Feliciano did squeeze his eyes shut as he shook his head. Holding the cigarette was one thing, but being made to actually smoke it was a whole other level of ruthlessness. But the way the grip around his shoulders was growing painful indicated that he wasn’t going to have much of a choice.

Is he really going to make me do this?

“What do you think’s worse?” Cristiano suddenly called brightly, lowering his hand from his son’s shoulders to prod harshly at the back of his arm, “How it feels in your lungs, or how it feels on your skin?”

Feliciano choked on a sob, biting his lip to stop the sound before it could escape his lips. He was still shaking his head, unable to give an answer to such a question. His father dug a brutal finger up and down his arm, and Feliciano could do nothing but squirm where he sat as he bore the awful torment.

“They’re hideous, you know.” Cristiano said softly, almost sympathetically. “The scars here. Such a shame you made me do that to you.”

Feliciano was helpless to stop the sob this time around, tears running down his face as the sadistic prodding continued. He had never felt so disgusting before, mentally recounting every scar on his body that marked him as damaged.

“I would hate if you made me burn you again.” Cristiano whispered softly.

Feliciano’s head whipped up when he felt a sudden heat prickle uncomfortably at his wrist. He turned his watery eyes to his father, noticing for the first time that the man had brought his still-smoldering cigarette to rest uncomfortably close to his wrist. It had yet to make contact with his skin, but it was close enough that he dared not move, “I-I’m s-sorry.”

“You will be.” Cristiano growled, the nauseating smell of alcohol coloring his words. “Now, take a drag or my hand might just slip-”

Feliciano did his best to keep still, but he was helpless to suppress a dramatic flinch when he felt the heat of the cigarette draw impossibly close to his wrist. He probably would have gone tumbling off the couch had his father not kept him firmly in place. The familiar burning sensation never came, and Feliciano could almost cry at the relief he felt.

Why is he doing this?

The teen still held his own cigarette as far away from his body as possible, but the heat near his wrist was a pretty good motivator for him to start bringing it closer. His hands were shaking so terribly he feared he’d drop it, but he was able to hold on as he brought the cigarette to his lips.

“There ya go, just like your old man.” Cristiano laughed, patting him a bit harder than necessary on the back.

Feliciano’s breath hitched at the words, unintentionally inhaling a lungful of smoke. He instantly pitched forward, coughing and wheezing as his body tried to expel the toxic substance. His stomach rolled, the smoke seeming to coat the inside of his mouth and throat.

Cristiano laughed heartily, obviously amused by the whole ordeal. He took one final drag of his own cigarette before putting it out in the ashtray to his side. He plucked the cigarette that Feliciano still held before placing it to his lips and inhaling deeply.

But Feliciano was too busy gripping at his chest as his lungs continued to spasm. His insides burned, and he was alarmed to note that his eyes wouldn’t stop watering. The worst part about it was that he didn’t even know what he did to deserve this punishment unless he really had been caught sneaking out.

“You did this to yourself.” Cristiano said lightly, seemingly unconcerned with the way his son was still gasping for breath. Feliciano shook his head, swiping viciously at his eyes to clear away the tears that had gathered there. To his side, his father took another long drag before standing, “If your school calls me again about you skipping class, we’re going to have a serious problem.”

Of course.

Feliciano felt so stupid for forgetting about that. It was true that he had made it a bit of a habit to skip class, sometimes even using the time to catch up on sleep. He should have known that the decision would come back to haunt him, and it was with a pang that he realized that he really had brought this upon himself.

Stupid, stupid, stupid!

While Feliciano was busy lamenting his idiotic slip-up, Cristiano used the moment to finish the cigarette. He looked wistfully at the burnt end that still continued to viciously smolder. He seemed to consider something, that wistful gaze morphing into something more akin to rage. His inebriated state did nothing to soothe the sudden wrath, instead only serving to exacerbate it — this fact might have been a large contributing factor for what he did next:

“Oi, stand up.” he motioned sharply for the teen to stand next to him.

Feliciano was perplexed, although he was swift to do as he was told. He stood meekly before his father, still fighting off an odd cough or two that wracked his frame. That should have been the end of the punishment, but it seemed like that wasn’t the case.

Cristiano no longer looked so flippant, instead glaring intently down on the younger, “Your brother doesn’t like to do as he’s told either.”

He felt cold at the words, *“Fratello?”*

“Consider this a gift from him.” Cristiano snarled, shooting a hand out to roughly grab the teen’s wrist in a fierce grip.

Feliciano hardly had time to react before he felt a searing pain on the inside of his wrist. He clapped his other hand over his mouth to muffle the scream of agony that broke free, finding he was unable to jerk away from the unrelenting hold. The pain was sharp, digging down as it scorched the skin.

It felt like the cigarette was held there for an eternity, but in reality it was pulled away after only a few excruciating seconds. Cristiano flicked it away, his face remaining impassive as he turned on his heel and out of the living room.

Feliciano gripped at his wrist, pulling the injury close to his chest as he desperately tried to keep his breathing even. He kneeled on the ground as tears raced down his face, splattering down on the ash-covered rug below.

The sudden sound of heavy footsteps marching down the hallway made Feliciano flinch. He could hear his father mumbling angrily about *'getting out of the damn house before I do something I'll regret'* before the front door whipped open and slammed shut with a resounding *bang.*

Now left on his own, Feliciano let himself break down in earnest.

What did Lovi do?

Feliciano had no idea just what his brother did to piss their father off to that degree, but it had to be serious judging by the level of cruelty the man had just shown. But it wasn't worth pondering, as he had something much more pressing to agonize over.

The teen gasped in pain, fighting the urge to curl onto the ground right there in the living room. He knew from experience that he needed to dress the burn as soon as possible, so it was with herculean effort that he forced his body into a standing position.

The moment he stood, Feliciano could feel the ground shift below him as a wave of dizziness crashed into him. He squeezed his eyes shut as he willed the feeling to pass, at the same time trying to loosen his grip around his wrist.

I need to see how bad it is.

True as that may be, Feliciano was terrified to assess his own injury. He didn't know if he could bear to see yet another *hideous* scar marking his skin, but he really didn't have much of a choice. With a shuddering breath, Feliciano forced his eyes open. He looked down at his wrist, feeling nausea hit him all over again.

The burn was a near-perfect circle an inch or so below the palm of his hand. It was outlined by a brilliant scarlet hue, the inside a softer version of red. It was awful, disfiguring, and Feliciano had to clap his hand over it to conceal it from his own view.

How am I supposed to hide this?

This was a rather careless move by Cristiano, as the mark was in a very exposed area. Feliciano had no idea how to cover it up without raising more suspicion, the thought causing him to choke on yet another sob.

He just wanted to be back in Italy already, that way he could avoid the questioning stares from his peers and teachers. He was terrified that Cristiano would go after his brother again if the abuse was exposed, terrified that all his efforts would go to waste.

I have to protect Lovi.

The problem with that was he couldn't even protect himself, and as Feliciano dragged himself to the bathroom where he hoped to find medical supplies, he prayed his father had kept to his word and left his brother alone.

It's my fault if he gets hurt, I can't let that happen.

Feliciano wiped away his tears for the last time as he yanked open the cabinet in the bathroom. There he was relieved to find a large patch-like bandage that wouldn't draw too much suspicion. He grabbed it, walking over to the sink to run cool water over the wound. It was a shame that he couldn't find any ointment to properly treat it, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He hissed as a sharp pain shot up his arm when the water made contact with his skin, the sudden intake of breath causing him to cough rather violently. That horrible smoke still coated the inside of his mouth, but he was able to get the coughing under control as he shut off the water.

Feliciano dried off his arm, refusing to look at the awful burn before sticking the bandage over it. Satisfied that the wound was concealed, he made his way into the kitchen to find something to drink in a desperate attempt to banish the ashy taste from his mouth.

A short time later, Feliciano was curled up on his bed. He still held his wrist tightly to his chest, the familiar feeling of tears burning the backs of his eyelids. There was little for him to do but grapple with the pain, no longer having anything to distract him. The stabbing, searing sensation of the burn felt impossibly foreign, yet so intensely familiar at the same time. He never thought he'd have to deal with such an injury again, and he was quickly coming to the conclusion that it was much worse to suffer on his own.

I'm sorry Lovi, I'm not as strong as you.

Lovino had been so resilient when they were children, but Feliciano knew that he was much more sensitive than his stubborn brother. Once again, he spared a thought for both his brother and Antonio, hoping that they were finding the strength to move on.

Without me.

Feliciano curled up even more, trying desperately not to start crying again. He had school in the morning, and he needed to actually sleep or else risk falling asleep in class again. He couldn't afford another slip-up, but he feared that he would keep messing up anyway.

"Two years, I can do it." Feliciano mumbled to himself. The minute he turned eighteen, he was going to move out and never look back. He would be free then, and if his brother didn't resent him then he'd move back in with him.

Just two years.

Feliciano smiled shakily to himself as sleep finally overtook him, the throbbing in his wrist no longer so potent as he dreamed of what freedom — *true freedom* — from his father would feel like. He couldn't wait until he could experience it for himself.

Chapter End Notes

:(

I am so sorry my child, you deserve much better.

This one actually kind of hurt me to write... so I actually have cigarette burns on my arm which is where I kind of got this, and I can say with confidence that it hurts like a BITCH. Cristiano is one cruel motherfucker, but to be fair this was in the tags.

Anywho, thank y'all for reading this. You guys keep me going, like seriously y'all are so wonderful. I feel bad for Feli and his misguided reasons for subjecting himself to this kind of treatment - poor baby doesn't deserve any of it.

It sounds weird for me to say that I hope you liked it, but I hope you liked it? Ugh, you know what I mean.

Thank you, love you, and goodnight <3

'Till next time!

Edit: so I should have clarified - I have scars on my arms that were left from cigarette burns years ago and there are only a few of them (I do not currently have fresh burns). Thanks to those who expressed concern in the comments, just thought I should mention that I'm doing fine... so yeah :)

Chapter 48

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino was moping and he knew it.

It's not like he *wanted* to sulk, to be wrapped in misery at all hours of the day, but he didn't have the strength to pull himself out of the depression he had fallen in. Things had well and truly fallen apart, and most days it was more convenient to curse his own existence than try to claw his way up out of the hole of guilt and self-hate. It was easier to give up, easier to feel defeated than dare hope that things could get better.

Okay, maybe he did want to sulk a little.

But he'd be lying if he said that things weren't getting better. The world finally had some color back, a welcome relief from the bleakness that had clouded his vision a mere week ago. It definitely helped that Antonio was adamant about keeping the curtains blown wide open, dousing the apartment in the sun's obnoxious rays.

Lovino couldn't help the smirk that overtook his features. They had fought on that — *the damn curtains of all things* — but in the end the Spaniard had won.

And they call me stubborn.

Antonio had been in a better mood lately, although for the life of him, Lovino couldn't figure out why. His cheerful demeanor and hopeful attitude was slowly but surely starting to rub off on him, and try as he might, Lovino couldn't help but feel just the smallest bit better.

Well, so long as he didn't think of his brother.

The smirk he'd been sporting was wiped right off his face as thoughts of what could be happening to his brother rushed through his mind. His imagination was running wild, but so were his memories, and he honestly couldn't tell which was worse.

"Lovi, can you help me a bit here?" Antonio's voice broke him out of his agonized musing, and Lovino looked up to see him struggling to carry what had to have been six bags of groceries into the apartment.

"I told you not to try and carry it all at once." he grumbled under his breath, moving to help his ditzy boyfriend nonetheless.

Antonio smiled sheepishly, handing off a few bags to the grumbling Italian, "Ah, *lo siento,* but I didn't want to make you carry all this."

Lovino rolled his eyes as he set some of the bags on the table. Despite his grumblings, he was beyond relieved that they finally found the money to fill their pantry. According to Antonio, he had found some extra cash stashed under the bed that he had been saving for a rainy day.

That paired with all the overtime had apparently been enough to pay off their rent and buy groceries for the week.

But Lovino wasn't sure if he totally bought that story.

They had been short six hundred dollars, a considerable amount to say the least. Antonio had never mentioned that he had been saving money, and there was no way that his paycheck was substantial enough to cover all of their expenses. It therefore begged the question of where he had found the money.

Lovino glared at his boyfriend, trying to uncover the truth with just his gaze alone. Antonio, oblivious as he was, didn't notice he was being scrutinized. He just kept on humming as he started putting away some of the groceries in the cabinet.

I swear to God if he did something illegal…

"Are you hungry? I can start dinner early if you are." Antonio said suddenly, closing the cabinet to instead lean against the counter.

Lovino shrugged, sitting himself down at the kitchen table, "I don't care, whatever you want."

"Well I'd really like to know what you want." Antonio said with a small smile, pushing himself away from the counter to walk closer.

I want my brother back.

The thought came out of nowhere, and Lovino could feel both his appetite and mood plummet. He put his head down, feeling that cloud of depression settle heavily above him, "Make something for yourself, I'm going to lay down."

Antonio's eyes went wide at the sudden shift in mood, although he should be used to it by now, "What's wrong, did I say something?"

Lovino groaned, instantly feeling guilty, "No, it wasn't you. I just want to lay down."

And never get up again.

"Oh, okay." Antonio chewed at his lip, looking around nervously before saying, "Uh, can I maybe lay down with you?"

Lovino looked at him curiously, wondering why he sounded so nervous, "I mean, you can do what you want, but why?"

He was still casting his restless gaze around the small kitchen, hands loosely fidgeting, "Well, I really need to talk to you about something."

The way he had phrased it caused anxiety to explode in his stomach. The downcast eyes, fidgeting hands, hell even the way he kept glancing up only to look away once more made Lovino want to cry.

This is it, he's finally leaving me.

It's not like he hadn't foreseen this outcome. After all, Lovino was a walking disaster who couldn't get anything right. He had been pushing Antonio's buttons for as long as they've known each other, of course he had a limit.

"O-okay." Lovino stuttered, gaze decidedly empty as he wordlessly made his way to the couch.

Antonio followed closely behind, his downcast eyes ensuring that he missed the sudden resignation in his boyfriend's face.

Lovino pushed himself into the corner of the couch, wrapping his arms around himself as he pulled his knees up in front of him. He watched as Antonio finally brought his eyes up, and Lovino noted the disgruntled look on his face when he had to sit a ways off.

Antonio was biting nervously at his lip again, clearing his throat before he finally made direct eye contact, "I'm sorry."

Lovino's breath hitched in his throat, his heart already breaking. He knew this had been coming, but that didn't stop the betrayal that settled heavily in his chest or the way tears were already gathering at the corner of his eyes. If anything, it just made it worse.

"I should have done this sooner, but you were already so hurt and I didn't want to make it worse." Antonio said guiltily, although there was resolve etched into his face.

The way he was dragging it out only fed the growing hopelessness that Lovino felt. Everyone that he had ever loved had left him, Antonio being the last good thing he had left. It suddenly became too much, and Lovino buried his face into his hands in a desperate attempt to hide the absolutely gutted look there, "Just spit it out already."

"Okay, uh, I'm really bad at this type of thing, but…" Antonio cleared his throat again, obviously trying to work up the nerve to speak his mind.

Lovino dreaded it, anticipating what was coming next.

This is it, I'm going to be all alone and-

"You need to snap out of it." he finally forced out, his voice uncharacteristically harsh.

Lovino's head snapped up, perplexed with the way Antonio was now glaring out him, "Wait, what-"

"I'm no good at this whole 'tough love' thing, but Gil said that you need to stop with your moping, and you know what?" Antonio was suddenly crossing his arms in a huff, "I agree with him."

That was perhaps the last thing Lovino had expected Antonio to say, and he wasn't really sure what to feel. On the one hand, he felt incredibly foolish since he had truly thought he was about to be dumped (even though he *knew* that Antonio would never be so cruel).

Another part of him felt defensive at the accusing tone in the Spaniard's voice, but mostly he was just stunned at the sudden turn of events.

Antonio still had his arms crossed, although the glare on his face had softened as he fixed the Italian with an imploring gaze, "It hurts me to see you sulk like this when I know that you're strong enough to pull yourself out of it, so why won't you?"

Lovino finally shook himself out of the stupor he had been caught in, scrunching his shoulders towards his ears as his defenses went up, "You don't get it, I just lost the last family I had left, and-"

"Stop saying that we *lost* Feli." Antonio cut him off, turning sharply on the couch to face where Lovino was still curled up in the corner, "He's not dead, so stop acting like it."

Lovino scoffed, slowly beginning to untangle himself to instead lean forward in an attempt to stare his boyfriend down, "He's suffering because of me, gone because of *me.* So yes, I think it's fair to say that I lost him."

"Me, me, me." Antonio rolled his eyes, *"Dios,* when does it stop being about you and start being about *us?"*

Lovino's eye twitched as he grit out angrily, "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I mean *us."* Antonio said slowly, like he was explaining something to a child. "Not just about you and me, but Feliciano too. As far as I'm aware, when we said that we were in it together, that meant all of us."

The aggression was wildly out of character for the Spaniard, and Lovino was briefly reminded of the countless fights and petty arguments they used to get in as children. They had both mellowed out over the years, but it seemed as though Antonio was suddenly remembering every single way to rile him up, "Look, I'm trying to protect him, and-"

"Jesus Lovi, you're not protecting him!" Antonio yelled, throwing his arms up in frustration. "Do you honestly think that a man who beat the shit out of you in an alley is really going to keep his word?"

Lovino's heart stuttered in his chest, although he kept the angry front up, "Fuck, Antonio, what do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? That you're right? What is it?"

Antonio groaned in exasperation, pushing a hand harshly through his hair, "What I want is for you to understand that this isn't over."

"But it is!" Lovino shouted, unable to completely mask the hurt in his voice. "Even if I take this to court, I'll lose — I mean, we can hardly take care of ourselves, how are we supposed to convince a judge that I can take care of my brother?"

"Why are you so convinced we'll lose?" Antonio asked, his voice slowly rising in volume. "You gave up before we could even try even though we have so many people that want to help!"

“I tried *so hard* since Roma died and it didn’t even matter.” Lovino’s heart was pounding painfully against his ribcage, the feeling almost unbearable. He was no longer tucked away in his corner on the couch, instead finding himself leaning forward with one hand harshly gripping the cushion below him. “Christ, I didn’t even get to mourn his fucking death because I had a brother to support, so don’t you dare lecture me on not trying!”

Antonio’s scowl suddenly deepened, “And where was I during all this?”

“Bastard, that doesn’t-”

“No, where was I Lovino?” Antonio growled, green eyes flashing dangerously.

Lovino was still glaring, but he could no longer keep their eyes locked. He retreated just the slightest bit so he was no longer leaning forward as he grit out a mumbled, “You stayed here with us.”

“Exactly.” Antonio said with a sharp nod. “I refused to abandon you even though it would have been easier to leave, so why are you abandoning your brother?”

The words stung, and Lovino retreated fully back into his corner. He didn’t want to believe that he had really abandoned his brother. He had been forced into a corner with no other option… right? This was the only way to keep him safe, and with a stubborn shake of his head, Lovino said, “I have no other choice, this is the only way.”

Antonio inhaled deeply, briefly closing his eyes to calm himself down, “Lovi, I’m only saying this because I love you.”

Lovino wasn’t sure if he liked the sound of that, “What are you-”

Suddenly, a pair of hands clamped tightly around his shoulders as he was yanked forward. Antonio hovered over him, eyes so cold they were unrecognizable, “If you’re seriously giving up on Feli right now when he needs you the most, then you are a terrible excuse for a brother.”

Lovino flinched, feeling how his heart twisted painfully in his chest. Antonio had said the words with conviction, like he truly believed them, and he suddenly couldn’t handle the intensity of the stare directed at him any longer.

But Antonio didn’t relinquish the grip on his shoulders just yet, forcing their eyes to remain locked, “I don’t get it, Lovi, I really don’t. I’ve seen you survive through so much, so why are you giving up *now* of all times?”

Lovino’s lip began to quiver as he was forced to endure that imploring gaze. He had tried so hard and sacrificed so much just to be intimidated into submission. Not only had it been a massive hit to his pride, but a crippling blow to his confidence. He was terrified of his brother being forced to suffer any more pain on account of his actions, but it was more than that. He was terrified of having to face his father again, that fact being at least part of the reason why he had so readily given in.

I'm so fucking pathetic.

Antonio was still waiting for him to respond, so with a shuddering breath he whispered brokenly, "I gave up because it's the easy way out."

His chest felt tight, the realization that he had acted like a complete coward tearing at his very being. Lovino gasped at the mental anguish he felt, finally having to reconcile with the fact that he really was a terrible brother.

Oh Dio, I was really going to let him go.

The grip on his shoulders was finally loosened, the fierce intensity in Antonio's eyes melting away into something decidedly more sympathetic, "Does this feel like the easy way out?"

Lovino shook his head, squeezing his eyes shut in shame. The vicious cycle of self-hate and misery he had been stuck in didn't feel like an easy way out at all. He was scared of being the reason his brother was hurt, the mere thought that his actions could translate into abuse on his behalf enough to send him into a blind panic. This life of inadequacy and constant self-doubt was soul-crushing, and Lovino wanted to defeat those dark parts of his psyche, but he wasn't sure if he could break out of it on his own.

Maybe I don't have to.

His breath hitched, eyes snapping up to find Antonio's steady gaze waiting patiently for him. He didn't know if he dared feel anything akin to hope, but he thought he could spare a breath of relief when he realized that he had never been alone.

Lovino cleared his throat, trying to dislodge the lump that had formed there before saying, "I don't want to give up anymore."

Antonio smiled softly at him, all semblance of anger gone from his expression, "I know."

In the next moment, Lovino was brought in for a comforting hug. He melted into it, feeling the way Antonio was dragging a slow hand up and down the length of his back. He refused to let himself cry, but the telltale burn behind his eyelids told him that he didn't really have a choice in the matter.

Antonio watched him sadly, pulling away to reach a hand up to wipe away a stray tear that ran down the younger's face, "I'm sorry I had to be so harsh, *amor,* but I need you to stay strong for me, just for a little longer."

"No." Lovino said firmly, even if he still felt shaken by the whole encounter, "You were right to chew my ass out, I was being selfish."

Antonio shook his head, "I don't think you were being selfish, just stubborn."

Lovino snorted, "I thought you liked my stubbornness."

"And I think I recall saying that it made me really mad sometimes." Antonio laughed, pulling Lovino back to hug him close.

With the intense atmosphere thoroughly abolished, Lovino finally allowed himself a moment to breathe. He couldn't believe it had taken someone yelling at him to finally snap him out of the hopeless daze he had been trapped in. Not to say that the depression he felt was gone, but it didn't feel as debilitating.

With a heavy sigh, Lovino finally mumbled, "Okay, you got me. I won't give up, so now what?"

At his core, Lovino still believed that they had already lost. He couldn't think of a single thing that could turn the tides of this hopeless case, but it was clear that Antonio didn't intend to go down silently. He didn't have much fight left in him, but dammit if he wasn't going to try anyway.

Antonio cleared his throat, "You still have your court date this week, right?"

And just like that, Lovino could feel hopelessness hollow out his chest once more, "Yeah, on Friday. Shit, how am I supposed to pay off those fines?"

Antonio was suddenly pushing him away, hands back on his shoulders with a careful smile on his face, "We'll take out a loan or something for now, but we won't have to worry about money anymore."

Earlier fears that his boyfriend had been doing something illegal crashed back into Lovino. They had already gone down that road to their ultimate detriment, and Lovino was ready to chew him out if that was the case, "What did you do?"

The Spaniard's eyes went comically wide at the biting tone he was met with, his hands flailing wildly around as he tried to explain, "Oh, well Gilbert texted me to come with him, and he really wouldn't let me say no, so he picked me up in his car because he said there was something *really* important going on-"

Lovino jerked away in shock, "Woah, slow the fuck down."

"I'm sorry Lovi, I didn't mean to sneak around." he hung his head in apparent guilt.

"It's okay." Lovino had to breathe in deeply, praying for patience. "Just, what the hell did that idiot want?"

Antonio chewed at his lip, "Uh, well he wanted me to meet Tino."

Lovino froze, "Wait, what?"

"Yeah, and he was actually a super cool dude." Antonio nodded, "I mean, I kind of yelled at him and maybe almost got into a fight at his house, but he's been working really hard, and I think he-"

"Okay, stop. No." Lovino growled, crossing his arms in annoyance. "Why in the fuck does he agree to meet with you, but he's perfectly happy to keep on ignoring me?"

Antonio shifted nervously, "Probably because he was afraid you'd drop the case?"

Lovino ground his teeth, “I wasn’t aware that this was his choice.”

“Okay, but you would have dropped it.” Antonio huffed. “If he didn’t ignore you then this would really all be hopeless.”

While Lovino would love to argue about this, he had already been put into his place one time too many that day. Everything Antonio said was true, but he was still miffed that he had been ignored, “Whatever, I don’t give a shit. What the hell did he want?”

Antonio was back to nervous fidgeting although he looked more excited than anything, “So you know that big company Roma used to run?”

Lovino rolled his eyes, “What kind of stupid ass quesetion is that?”

Of course he remembered, it was the reason their grandfather had travelled so much. He tried to have a presence in his grandsons’ lives, and for the most part he did. But the man was also extremely busy, only settling down when he learned of the horrifying abuse that went on right under his nose.

“Right, that was dumb, sorry.” Antonio mumbled. “Anyway, he left a will.”

“He did?” Lovino breathed, never remembering any mention of that after he died.

Antonio was nodding vehemently, “Tino thinks that it was hidden from you and Feli, but Roma left you guys a massive inheritance!”

What?

Lovino was shaking his head, denial being a close companion to shock. His grandfather had been wealthy to the most extreme degree but Lovino didn’t know that he’d be given a cut of it. Honestly he thought all the money had gone to the man’s daughter — his absent mother.

After several failed attempts to speak, Lovino was finally able to squeak out, “You’re fucking with me.”

Antonio laughed brightly, shaking his head, “It’s true! You and your brother are now the sole heirs to his entire company.”

Lovino was still too shocked to really reply, but he did manage a soft, “Holy shit.”

He slumped back on the couch, reeling with the new information. He looked around their cramped and run-down apartment, glancing at the cracked and faded ceiling. To think that they wouldn’t have to live in such conditions or wonder if they had budgeted enough to afford food for the week, that they would finally have the money to provide a stable and secure home.

I can get my brother back.

His breath hitched in excitement, and suddenly that short conversation in the alleyway came flooding back to him. He had asked his father why he was trying to ruin their lives, and the

man had answered with a cryptic, *'Oh, he's going to make me rich.'*

It all made sense now.

"Holy shit!" Lovino said again, this time yelling it as he surged forward to grip Antonio by the shoulders, "Is that why that bastard wants my brother? Does he think he can take his inheritance?"

Antonio was nodding again, "He's only sixteen, so his inheritance goes to his parent or guardian until he's old enough to claim it."

Lovino glared, releasing his boyfriend's shoulders to instead launch off the couch, "Motherfucker!"

Antonio watched in shock from the couch, although there was some relief in his face at the return of the Italian's fiery attitude, "So do you still want to drop the case?"

"Hell no!" Lovino instantly yelled, beginning to pace in the small living room. "That son of a bitch has taken everything from us, I will *not* let him take this away too."

He wasn't just talking about the money, although being able to live free of the financial burdens that had plagued them was definitely a blessing. No, this was about more than that. Lovino had been arrested, beaten, intimidated until he had given in. His confidence had been obliterated just like his fighting spirit, but now he could see a light at the end of the tunnel. Roma seemed to be watching over them even in death, and Lovino would be damned if the last of his grandfather's kindness was snatched away because of his own cowardice.

Antonio smiled, relaxing fully on the couch as he breathed a massive sigh of relief, "Me neither."

Lovino continued to pace, trying to think things through. He needed to tread carefully in order to keep his brother safe, but knowing his father then the man had probably broken his promise. Even if it wasn't physical (which Lovino feared it was) Cristiano knew every way to capitalize on his brother's anxiety and negative self-image. The first thing he needed to do was get him out of that house and with somebody that could keep him out of the crossfire while they fought this out.

But who would take him in?

"Um, I know you're probably still pissed at him, but Gil says he has a plan." Antonio said softly.

Lovino whipped around, "He does?"

Antonio nodded, "Yeah, he has a friend that he thinks will help us out, but we need to convince Feli to cooperate with us or it won't work."

Goddamn, how many 'friends' does the loudmouth have? He thought, thinking of the countless favors the albino had already called in.

“Well how am I supposed to convince him?” Lovino asked in exasperation. “It’s not like I can just show up for a visit now, can I?”

Maybe I can sneak into his school or something…

“We could probably catch him at the library.” Antonio said casually, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Except, it wasn’t obvious, “Yeah, right. Like he still has a job.” Lovino rolled his eyes, “You do know the controlling piece of shit he’s living with, yeah?”

“Actually,” Antonio rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly, “he does still have his job. He, uh, kind of slipped me some money a couple days ago…”

Lovino didn’t move, trying to supress the sudden explosion he felt coming on, “And you never told me this, *why?”*

Antonio looked down, biting at his lip, “I mean, I only found out a little while ago.”

“So I could have gone and seen him at any point, and nobody thought to tell me?” Lovino growled. While he honestly didn’t know if he would have had the nerve to face his brother, being able to go and check up on him would have at least given him some peace of mind.

Antonio sighed, “I’m sorry, but that’s really not important right now.”

“Like hell it is!” Lovino pursed his lips in annoyance, beginning to tap his foot in lieu of pacing as he continued to stand stiffly in front of the couch, “While you’re at it, do you have any more bombshells you want to hit me with?”

He had said the words sarcastically, not expecting anything more shocking than what he had just heard. But it seemed that Antonio was full of surprises that day, “Uh, just one more I think.”

Oh Dio, what is it now?

Lovino dragged a heavy hand down his face, suddenly exhausted. He didn’t know what else there could possibly be, but he sat himself down on the couch anyway and gestured loosely for the Spaniard to continue.

But instead of launching into some kind of explanation, Antonio snaked an arm around his shoulders and tugged him into his side. He was silent for a long time, apparently mustering up the courage to say something. It took a few more tense minutes, but finally he was able to mutter, “Do you know where your mother went after she left?”

Lovino jerked in surprise, although he was held in place by the arm around his shoulders. He wasn’t exactly sure where this was going, but the resigned tone wasn’t a good sign, “Don’t know, don’t care. She left us alone with a monster, she’s dead to me.”

Antonio’s grip suddenly tightened around him, “You don’t care about her at all?”

Honestly? He didn't really know. On the one hand, she was their mother and part of Lovino still desperately held on to the thought that she would still come back. But the woman had left when he was only a child — he had only been seven years old. It was so long ago that he could hardly remember what she looked like. But despite that, her departure had major ramifications. The abuse had escalated, and it was her abandonment that fostered in Lovino some pretty deep-seated trust issues. He resented her for that, so it was with a shake of the head that he gave an answer, "No, she can stay out of my life."

Antonio nodded slowly, "What about Feli?"

"What about him?" Lovino asked shortly.

"Does he miss her?" Antonio asked softly, refusing to make eye contact.

All these questions were getting suspicious, "He was four when she left, I don't even know how much he remembers her. Why?"

Antonio shrugged, looking visibly uncomfortable, "Nevermind, it's not important."

"Oh no, you're not getting out of this that easily." Lovino glared, refusing to be shrugged off. "What happened? What's with all these questions?"

"I-I don't really know how to tell you." Antonio mumbled, the slight stutter not going unnoticed.

Lovino could feel trepidation pick at his insides, "What do you mean?"

Antonio cleared his throat, peering down to make direct eye contact before he said emotionlessly, "She's dead."

The cold delivery of the news was fitting because all Lovino could feel was ice in his veins. All these years he wondered what had become of his mother, for some reason the thought that she might be dead never crossing his mind.

"Lovi? You alright?" Antonio asked nervously, lightly shaking him.

Lovino looked up slowly, mind racing. He wasn't sure what to feel. Sad? Hurt? But did that woman deserve his grief after she had so callously abandoned her own children?

He shook his mind clear, noticing the way Antonio was still waiting for a response, "How?"

Antonio sighed, not needing any more context behind the question, "She died in a car crash, although I don't really know the timing of everything."

Lovino rubbed at his eyes, his emotions a tangled mess of confusion and apathy. He needed more information than that, but that seemed like that was all he was going to get for the time being. It was too strenuous to sort through those conflicting emotions, and he was already so tired. He had more important things to worry about right now, so he cleared his throat to mask any lingering emotion before saying, "Okay, when can we go see my brother?"

“What?” Antonio asked in shock.

“Look, I can’t do anything about the fact that she’s… she’s dead.” Lovino got out, trying to bury the creeping feeling of guilt that snuck in as he tried to shrug away his mother’s death. “But my brother is very *not dead,* and I would really like to get him back now.”

Antonio shook his head sadly, “Lovi, it’s okay to feel upset about this.”

But he didn’t know if he did feel upset about this, and that’s what was so troubling. His mother had been a kind woman even if she had distanced herself from her family in the months preceding her departure. After all, she had been a victim too, but unlike her children, she could escape. She started going out more and more, not coming home until the early hours of the morning. Her abandonment really started years before her actually walking out, her disappearance being a gradual thing.

Lovino bit at his lip, deciding that he didn’t want to linger on this anymore. He would decide whether or not to grieve her death later when he could afford to shut down. But right now, he had a case to win, “I just want to get my brother back.”

“Please don’t push this down.” Antonio begged. “She was still your mother, don’t you feel anything?”

Lovino shook his head, scrubbing at his eyes once more as he once again buried that traitorous feeling of grief that settled at the pit of his stomach, “Right now I feel confused because I *don’t* feel anything,” *that was a lie,* “but I just learned that I can get my brother back and I’d rather focus on that right now.”

Please, don’t make me think about this anymore.

With a long-suffering sigh, Antonio relented, “Okay, but I’m not forgetting about this.”

Lovino shrugged, once again bottling up any kind of negative feeling, “Sure, whatever. Now what kind of plan does the loudmouth have?”

Antonio still looked like he may bring up his mother again, but he was able to drop the subject in favor of pulling out his phone, “I don’t know exactly, but he told me to text him when I got through to you.”

Lovino quirked up an eyebrow at that, “So he put you up to this?”

Antonio laughed nervously, “Well, somebody had to get you to stop moping, and we both figured it would be best if it was me.”

Good choice.

While Lovino would never lash out at Antonio (well, not intentionally at least), the same couldn’t be said for that obnoxious albino. If Gilbert had dared to speak to him with the same ferocity that his boyfriend had, things could have quickly gone awry.

He crossed his arms, “I would tell you that you’re a jerk, but your stupid plan worked so whatever.”

Antonio smiled softly at that, “I really missed you, Lovi.”

Lovino snorted with a roll of his eyes, “I never left.”

“You kind of did.” Antonio said lightly, but his attention was pulled away when his phone went off. His eyes scanned the screen, sending out a reply before he brought his eyes back up, “Alright, we need to meet him at the library in an hour.”

Butterflies exploded in Lovino’s stomach at the thought of facing Feliciano again. He had given up on him, and he still felt like he was a terrible brother as a result. But as Antonio had said, it wasn’t about him. This was about pursuing the life he thought they’d never have — one of peace and security.

So, with that thought in mind, Lovino stood up and drew in a deep breath, “Okay, are you coming with me?”

Antonio stood next to him, “Of course, we’re in this together.”

“Yeah,” Lovino said with a soft smile, “I guess we are.”

Antonio leaned down to surprise him with a quick peck on the cheek, “Alright, now let’s go get Feli back.”

Lovino brought a hand up to his cheek where he had just been kissed, feeling his face heat up in embarrassment.

Some fucking nerve surprising me like that.

But he couldn’t help the smile on his face, his chest swelling with warmth. It was almost overwhelming as he had been freezing for days. Lovino decided he rather liked the feeling, and as he watched Antonio turn to disappear down the hallway, he whispered out a heartfelt, “Thank you.”

“What was that, Lovi?” Antonio called loudly over his shoulder.

Lovino glared after him, “Nothing, you’re hearing things dumbass.”

He laughed loudly in response, continuing his way down the hallway as he yelled, "I love you, too."

Yeah, some real fucking nerve.

Chapter End Notes

Ayoooooo

Sorry this one took longer than expected, but I had to plan some things out for the upcoming chapters. Oh boy y'all have no idea what's coming, and I'm lit as FUCK...

...then again, there's always at least one of you that seems to know exactly what's gonna happen next...

Not important lol.

I hope you liked it! We finally get Lovi back to his sassy, bitchy self and I'm so happy about it. Also, don't try to bottle up your feelings, it never ends well. Anyone think they can figure out who Gil's friend is this time? Lol I picture him as this social butterfly that likes to meddle, so of course he has an abundance of friends / favors to call in.

Op, now I'm rambling. Okay, love y'all so much let me know what you think of this one!

I'm outtie, see ya later!

'Till next time!

Chapter 49

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino marched aggressively down the street, eyes alight with all the intensity of a raging inferno. His face was twisted into a heated scowl, although the look had lost some of its ferocity due to the exhaustion that still plagued him. He glared at passersby, his red-rimmed eyes probably giving him a quality of derangement that he didn't fully intend to have. Truth be told, he was trying to squash the sharp spike of anxiety that pierced directly through his stomach by projecting an image of hostility and confidence — and it would have worked…

… if only the cheerful Spaniard at his side would stop swinging their arms together like they were some cutesy couple — the bastard was *totally* ruining his image!

"Would you stop that?" Lovino finally growled, although he made no move to withdraw his hand.

Antonio smirked, only gripping his hand tighter as he continued to swing them like some ditzy teen on his first date, "But why, Lovi?"

"Because I said so!" Lovino said loudly, noting with a hint of dread that the library was just ahead of them.

"Aww, you're blushing!" Antonio cooed, obviously delighted by the fact.

Lovino brought his hand up to his face to confirm that he was indeed blushing, "Shut up!"

Antonio laughed loudly, "You know what you look like-"

"Don't say it." Lovino growled.

"But Lovi, you look just like-"

"Don't say it, bastard!"

"-a little tomato!" Antonio finished with a teasing smirk.

Lovino glared, noting distantly that their arms were still swinging, "And you look like an idiot, but you don't hear me announcing it to everyone within a fifty-fucking-mile radius."

Antonio pouted, "If you don't want to hold my hand, then why don't you just let go?"

Good question.

Lovino glared, trying to pry his hand away, but his hand just wouldn't cooperate with him. It might have had something to do with that fact that he was nervous as all hell to see his brother again, or the fact that he wasn't completely recovered from the days spent wrapped in

depression. Either way, he couldn't force himself to let go, so he turned his face away with a huff, "It doesn't matter, jerk."

Antonio stopped swinging their arms, his smile no longer so amused, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make fun of you."

The sheepish look on his face made Lovino feel all different kinds of guilty. He knew that his boyfriend was only trying to lighten the mood, but he just wasn't in the right state of mind for that. But still, he didn't mean to come across so harshly, so it was with a sigh that he tightened his own grip on the Spaniards hand, "Whatever, just stop swinging our arms like some idiot teenager."

Antonio's face instantly brightened, "But Lovi, you are a teenager."

"And you're an idiot." Lovino muttered.

The subsequent laughter was infectious, although Lovino was able to contain the smile that threatened to break free. He could already spot a certain albino leaning against a brick wall just ahead. Apparently he was bringing a friend that he had recruited to help them out, although Lovino couldn't spot anyone else there.

Gilbert's startling red eyes suddenly snapped open when he heard the approaching couple, that irritating smirk of his fixed firmly in place, "Well, well, well, look what the cat dragged in."

Lovino released Antonio's hand (ignoring the soft grumble from the Spaniard) in favor of crossing his arms across his chest, "What's that supposed to mean, dumbass?"

The albino rolled his eyes, looking directly past him to smile at Antonio instead, "Glad to see he's back, good job dude."

Antonio smiled proudly, "It sure wasn't easy."

"Oi, I'm standing right here!" Lovino wasn't sure who to glare at, but in the end he let his gaze settle on Gilbert when he decided that the German pissed him off more.

But Gilbert didn't seem particularly troubled by the heated glare directed at him, still smiling widely as he pushed himself away from the brick building, "Alright, now that 'mister doom and gloom' is back from the dead-"

"Do you want me to punch you, bastard?"

"-we can finally put my super awesome plan into action!" Gilbert finished excitedly.

Lovino dragged a heavy hand down his face in exasperation, "Great, now what is it?"

Gilbert smirked, "Only the most brilliant plan ever concocted by yours truly."

Lovino rolled his eyes, "Seriously doubt it."

“Y’know, you could act a little more excited.” Gilbert pouted.

“I’d be a lot more excited if you tell me what you have planned.” was the mumbled retort.

Gilbert crossed his arms, “You’re really killing my vibe here, dude.”

Praying silently to himself for the strength *not* to kill a certain albino in the next two seconds, Lovino grit out, “Look, this situation is not a joke to me and I would really appreciate it if you just tell me whatever idiotic scheme you came up with.”

Gilbert groaned in annoyance, although he seemed unconcerned with the biting tone he had just been met with, “Fine. So basically my buddy Francis has been keeping an eye on Feli for like the last week and a half.”

“Great, and why should I give a shit?” Lovino growled, feeling so high-strung he feared he may snap.

Antonio seemed to have sensed Lovino’s mounting irritation because he brought an arm around his waist, pulling him into his side, “I know you’re nervous, but you need to try to relax.”

“No kidding.” Gilbert said under his breath.

A sharp glare from Antonio silenced the German nuisance before he could go on, and it was with a long-suffering sigh that Lovino tried to work the tautness out of his body. He was feeling more anxious than he could remember in a long time, and knowing that his brother was so close only served to exacerbate the feeling. But the arm around his waist did offer a grounding sort of support that took the edge off. His heart still beat without any particular rhythm, and his hands were uncomfortably clammy, but at the very least he had the support of those around him.

Now satisfied that he wasn’t about to bite Gilbert’s head off, Lovino turned back to the issue at hand with a newfound sense of calm, “Okay, you have a friend that’s watching my brother. Why does that matter?”

Gilbert still looked entirely unphased by the whole ordeal, that smirk still firmly in place, “He’s been recording everything he’s noticed, and since he’s a teacher, he’s required to go to the police if he suspects anything like neglect or abuse.”

And just like that, Lovino remembered why he was so nervous in the first place, “Is Feli alright?”

Antonio tightened his grip around his waist in a silent show of support when Gilbert’s obnoxious smile turned pained, “Do you want the truth?”

That wasn’t promising.

Lovino wasn’t sure if he wanted the truth or not, but if he was about to face his brother inside, then he needed to be prepared, “Yeah, is he okay?”

Gilbert pushed a hand through his hair, his cheerful demeanor forgotten, “He’s not great. Ludwig says that he sleeps through most of his classes, and Francis says that he’s been withdrawn.”

Nodding slowly in resignation Lovino asked, “Is that it?”

Gilbert laughed sardonically, “Honestly, dude? I don’t know. Ludwig told me that something’s wrong with his arm, but apparently Feli won’t tell him what happened.”

“Great.” Lovino mumbled, leaning heavily against Antonio when he suddenly felt exhausted. He wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he gestured wordlessly for the albino to continue.

He moved on quickly, also eager to change the subject, “Anyway, so Francis has like a few pages full of observations and stuff that he recorded, and all I have to do is text him and he’s going to report it.”

Antonio shifted nervously, “Is that safe? I mean, what if the police don’t make an arrest and we end up putting Feli in more danger?”

Gilbert was shaking his head before Antonio had even finished speaking, “If a social worker, like *me* for example, thinks that a kid is in immediate danger, then we can remove them from the home and place them in protective custody.”

“Really?” Lovino breathed.

It’s that easy?

“Totally dude.” Gilbert smiled softly.

“But where would he go?” Antonio asked.

“Well,” Gilbert said, beginning to bounce lightly where he stood in excitement, “I originally wanted to place him back with you guys since you don’t have any other relatives, but I think it’s best if we can remove him completely from the situation to keep him out of it.”

Lovino nodded, having thought the exact same thing, “He’s been through enough already, but who would take him in?”

The excitement in Gilbert’s voice only seemed to grow, “Like I said, you guys don’t have any relatives, and I really didn’t want Feli to go to some random stranger. Since Tino is like the best attorney in the world, he’s gonna pull some strings for me and convince the court to let my friend take him in until the case is settled.”

While Lovino felt hopeful at the excitement the albino was exhibiting, he didn’t know how comfortable he was with handing his brother off to somebody he didn’t know, “And just who is this ‘friend’ of yours?”

Gilbert simply smiled, turning to look over his shoulder as he waved at someone from down the street. He turned back around with a smug look, “You actually already know her, and it looks like she just got here.”

Lovino quirked an eyebrow up at that, leaning to the side to look where Gilbert had been waving. There, approaching quickly from down the street, came a petite young woman wrapped in a fluffy white scarf. Her flowing chestnut hair bounced gently against the soft pink blouse she wore with each step she took. She walked with confidence, a mischievous smile overtaking her features when she approached the small group still standing on the sidewalk.

But Lovino couldn't focus on any of those finer details. No, he was much more shocked with the fact that he recognized her, "What the hell? Elizabeta?"

Elizabeta stopped in front of them, her smile brightening considerably when she saw the way a certain Italian was gaping at her, "Lovino! It's so good to see that smiling face of yours again."

He shut his mouth with a *snap,* instead choosing to glare, "What are you doing here, hag?"

She pouted, "I see that attitude of yours hasn't changed."

Gilbert laughed loudly at the exchange, "Elizabeta's gonna help us. She couldn't resist my super awesome charm."

She instantly turned to grab Gilbert harshly by the ear, "This had nothing to do with you and whatever *charm* you think you have."

"Ow, ow, ow!" Gilbert cried, tapping desperately at her arm when she continued to pull. "Let me go, let me go!"

Elizabeta released him with a huff, turning back to Lovino with a soft smile, "Your brother is such a sweetheart, and I can't bear to see him so miserable! This situation needs a woman's touch, so I'm happy to help."

Lovino's eyes went wide, looking back and forth between where Gilbert was still rubbing at his ear, to where Elizabeta stood with that innocent smile. It was of no surprise to Lovino that she could take care of herself (the proof of that was still grumbling about the harsh way he'd been handled), and she had been a reliable coworker. He supposed that she was a good choice, even if she was every bit as mischievous as the albino at her side.

"I like her." Antonio whispered.

Elizabeta must have heard him, eyes drifting down to see Antonio's arm still wrapped securely around the Italian's waist. She looked back up with an excited smile, "Oh, is this your boyfriend?"

Lovino's face went red, "What's it to ya?"

But the woman didn't pay him any mind, already turning to Antonio to properly introduce herself, "Lovino and I used to work together, my name's Elizabeta."

She stuck an arm out to shake, and Antonio took it after just a moment of shocked hesitation, "Antonio. And yes, I'm Lovi's boyfriend."

Elizabeta's smile only grew as she pulled away, "You two are so cute together!"

Lovino groaned in embarrassment, "Please don't start with this nonsense."

Gilbert chose that moment to insert himself back into the conversation, "While I would love to be the fourth wheel to this little get-together, we should really get going before Feli can sneak away."

"What do you mean?" Lovino asked, trying to ignore the insufferable woman's cooing about how 'cute' he and Antonio were together.

The albino looked thoughtful, "Well I know that he's already inside which is good, but Ludwig says he's been really skittish lately. He's been sneaking out every night to be here, but he's never in there for more than an hour anymore."

Lovino nodded, contemplating that tidbit of information. While he thought it was uncharacteristically bold for Feliciano to sneak out like this, he knew firsthand how unbearable it was to live in an abusive household. It was hard enough back in Italy, but his brother was all alone now. The library was probably one of his only escapes, and even if it was risky for him to sneak out, this haven would be difficult to give up.

"So basically," Gilbert plowed ahead, "we can remove him from the house, but if he denies the abuse then he'll just end up back with his father. We need to convince Feli that he doesn't need to give himself up."

Yeah, like it's that easy.

"You do realize that my brother probably thinks he deserves this, right?" Lovino said sullenly, fearful that the time Feliciano spent with their father was enough to completely destroy his already dubious sense of self-worth.

"That's why she's here." Gilbert gestured towards Elizabeta.

Lovino looked at the woman skeptically, "And why would Feli believe you more than me?"

Elizabeta smirked, "Because unlike that clueless fool, I actually know a thing or two about charm."

"Hey, I can be charming!" Gilbert cried indignantly

Elizabeta ignored him, "And I don't intend to convince your brother of anything, I just want to talk to the poor dear. Maybe all he needs is a little kindness."

"You would say something like that." Lovino grumbled, wondering when he had let such irritating people work their way into his inner circle. He didn't have friends, he never really did, but he supposed that's what these people were — for better or for worse.

God help me.

"So are you ready to go then?" Gilbert asked suddenly, eyes daring him to back out.

Butterflies exploded in his stomach all over again, but Lovino squashed the feeling before it could consume him. He wasn’t ready, he didn’t know if he’d ever be ready, but this was only the first step in a long and arduous road to winning freedom for himself and his brother.

A sharp squeeze at his side caused Lovino to look up, finding Antonio’s bright smile laying in wait. The silent support offered him a sense of security, so with a shuddering breath he said as confidently as he dared, “Yeah, let’s go get him.”

Chapter End Notes

Ayoo, I'm back at ya with... not a lot... short chapter, not a lot happens, sorry lol

So basically, this chapter got waaaayyyyy too long, like ridiculously long, so I split it up. That being said, the next chapter should be up in the next day or so! Sorry, I know that nothing really happens here and it's kinda just a bunch of exposition and fluff, but I didn't want to keep you waiting any longer!

With that out of the way, I need to give everyone who guessed Elizabeta in the comments a big congrats! I'm sorry that I didn't respond to a lot of ya'll 'cause I couldn't give anything away lol. There were actually a bunch of you that got it right, so I guess I'm not as sneaky as I tried to be (a few of ya'll caught the fleeting comment Feli made about the 'new nice lady' he met at the library)

Even though it's short, I hope you liked it! Can you tell I love Elizabeta? Because I love Elizabeta. She's so wonderful, I can't.

Anyway, love you all thanks for reading. Next one should be out soon!!

'Till next time!

Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The library was uncharacteristically empty that evening, only a handful of people weaving silently through the towering maze of books or hunched over a table, writing utensil gripped firmly in hand. The relative vacancy of the room created an odd atmosphere — an echochamber of sorts that captured every sound and played it back on loop. From the gentle scratch of a pencil on paper to the steady tapping of computer keys, the second floor of the library was a peaceful place indeed.

It was here, lost in the haze of peaceful monotony, that Feliciano found himself dutifully placing a cart of books back to their designated spots. He was quite content to be here, the repetitive nature of his job soothing his overwrought mind.

Feliciano started humming lightly to himself, unconsciously picking a tune that Roma had loved to sing. He slid another book into place on the shelf, relishing in the way that everything had a place. His cart of books was almost empty, and it was with a sinking feeling that he realized that he would be done early tonight.

I probably should be leaving…

… but he didn't want to. Feliciano had no idea why exactly he kept showing up to work — and especially after the whole debacle with the cigarette a few nights ago. But try as he might, the teen just couldn't seem to let this place go. Nevermind the fact that he was terrified of being caught, but Roderich simply wouldn't let him quit.

Something in the back of his mind whispered that if he really wanted to leave he could just walk out and never return, but he ignored it.

Feliciano shook his mind clear, getting back to the task at hand. He grabbed another book, checking its number before groaning loudly in annoyance. This one went on the top shelf, and alas he couldn't spot anybody of a taller stature to help him reach.

He pouted, staring up at the shelf like it was some great obstacle for him to overcome. After the one-sided staring match, Feliciano resolved himself to suck it up and stretch on his tiptoes in a futile attempt to reach the towering shelf that hovered over him.

Feliciano stretched, tongue sticking out in concentration. He almost reached it, holding his arm out to push the book into place, but a sharp pain that shot up his arm made him recoil away with a hiss. "Ay!" he yelped in alarm, nearly dropping the book he'd been holding.

Feliciano clapped a hand over the bandaid on his wrist, waiting for the pain to ebb away. By stretching up he had aggravated the burn on his arm, the brutal reminder of his pitiful state causing tears to spring to his eyes.

His father had been adamant about keeping that particular injury hidden. The next morning when Cristiano was once again sober, he had been positively fuming about the admittedly careless act. The burn was almost always exposed regardless of what he was wearing, so Feliciano had to keep it covered to avoid suspicion.

Sniffling quietly to himself, he slowly released the vice-like grip he had over his wrist, the pain losing some of its edge. Things had been even more tense in the house since the incident, something he didn't think was possible. Cristiano seemed to have realized his mistake in burning him in such an exposed area, resulting in him spending more time out of the house. In fact, he was almost never home until well after dark — this fact emboldening Feliciano in his (almost) daily escapades.

Satisfied that the pain had subsided (at least for now), Feliciano wiped a few stray tears away with the back of his hand. He very nearly glared at the top shelf, holding the book in a loose grip as he contemplated how to reach it.

Maybe if I jump…

Lost in thought as he was, Feliciano didn't hear the sudden drumming of footsteps thundering towards him. He was just about to reach up for yet another attempt to return the accursed book when a body crashed abruptly into his back.

"Wha-?" Feliciano gasped, nearly pitching forward in surprise. A pair of arms wrapped around his middle, keeping him firmly in place, and the teen could feel his heart pick up at the sudden contact. His back went taut, every instinct screaming at him to thrash and twist to escape the suffocating hold that imprisoned him.

Okay, calm down. You're at work, you can't freak out.

He squirmed, craning his neck to see who had so recklessly invaded his personal space. Feliciano's grip on the book he'd been holding tightened to a near painful extent, having to forcibly swallow the feeling of anxiety in order to stutter out a bewildered, "C-can I help you?"

The person behind him laughed, although it didn't sound mocking. They cleared their throat, the voice that broke free blessedly familiar, "No, but I think I can help you."

Wait, that sounds like…

The book Feliciano had been holding hit the ground with a dull *thump.* He was stuck, suspended in time for approximately two faltering heartbeats before he wrenched his body around, burying his face into the crook of his brother's neck, "Lovi!"

Lovino nodded, pulling the younger closer in a crushing hold as he choked out a simple, "I missed you."

"Me too." Feliciano instantly cried back, his body shaking with emotion, "So much."

Lovino hid his face in the younger's hair, his breathing coming out in stuttered gasps. Feliciano's own breath hitched dangerously, and before he knew it, he had started crying pitifully into his brother's shoulder.

Oh God, what is he doing here?

Feliciano couldn't decide what to feel. There was definitely confusion and a healthy dose of fear still present, but more than anything he felt pure, unadulterated relief.

"I'm so sorry," Lovino suddenly gasped out. "I never meant to abandon you."

Feliciano shook his head, never thinking for an instant that he'd been abandoned. It had been his decision to leave, his decision to give himself up, the resulting agony being a burden he was willing to bear.

But right now he was able to forget the pain, forget the fear of being caught. Feliciano's shoulders continued to hitch up as his lungs spasmed painfully, hot tears blazing haphazard trails down his cheeks. He felt weak, too weak to stand, and it was with a short yelp of surprise that his knees buckled.

Lovino caught him before he could go sprawling, lowering them both carefully to the ground. The tight hold Feliciano had on his brother never relented as they both settled heavily on the rough carpeting below. Briefly he wondered what kind of pathetic picture they painted together, two teens crying pitifully on the ground in the middle of a *library* of all things. But it was too much effort to contemplate it further, the intense feeling of security being far too prominent in Feliciano's mind right then.

The moment could have lasted forever — Feliciano wished that it would have — but Lovino abruptly shifted, in the process brushing against the burn on his arm.

Feliciano flinched, and Lovino froze. They pulled back, each looking at each other with wide eyes. Suddenly, Lovino was in a flurry of activity as he pulled out of the hug in order to scrutinize his brother, "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

With the spell thoroughly broken, Feliciano could feel his defenses go back up, "No, it's nothing."

"Liar." Lovino mumbled, finally spotting the bandaid at his wrist. "Let me see." he ordered, already taking his wrist in a gentle hold.

"I'm okay, Lovi." Feliciano sniffled, but he didn't resist when the bandaid was slowly peeled back.

He had to look away, not willing to face the blistered deformity that marked his skin. Lovino openly stared, his face decidedly blank, but the slight shake in his hands betrayed the ever growing wrath.

Feliciano started crying, feeling shame bubble uncomfortably in his chest, "I'm sorry, I couldn't get away!"

Lovino physically shook himself out of his enraged stupor, “It’s okay, this wasn’t your fault.”

“You don’t know that!” Feliciano shouted, suddenly recalling that his brother should be out living his life, not here with him. “What are you doing here?”

Lovino eyed him carefully, “What do you mean?”

He shook his head, placing a hand over his heart in an attempt to ease the horrible pounding in his chest, “Why does everyone keep getting in the way?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Lovino deadpanned, already back to fussing over the various bruises that he could spot.

Feliciano sat, bewildered, but managed to crane his neck over the older’s shoulder. There, standing only a little ways off, stood Antonio and Gilbert. There was also the nice lady he met recently, all three of them keenly watching the scene unfolding in front of them.

If everybody’s here, then that means…

Feliciano groaned loudly in despair, flopping back on the ground.

“What? Does something hurt?” Lovino asked frantically, trying to figure out why his little brother was starting to cry again.

Feliciano pressed both his hands into his eyes, trying desperately to stop the crying fit that was already consuming him, “Gil and Toni are here too, that means that you’re gonna try to do something.”

Lovino froze in his actions, looking at him with an odd mix of worry and confusion, “And that’s a bad thing?”

Of course it was, it meant that all his efforts were about to go to waste. He had given himself up with every intention to slip quietly away to Italy, freeing his brother and Antonio in the process. He couldn’t live with himself and the all-consuming guilt knowing that he was the reason for most of their suffering, but nothing had gone according to plan — not even in the slightest.

“Please just leave.” Feliciano breathed.

Lovino rolled his eyes, “No.”

Feliciano tried to glare, but the anger in the stare was lost to the resignation in his voice, “This is my decision, not yours.”

“Well I happen to disagree with your decision, so I’m ignoring it.” Lovino said firmly, the conviction in his tone unyielding.

This conversation wasn’t going anywhere, not now when Lovino was feeling particularly stubborn. Feliciano wasn’t sure what to do, so he tried once again to reason with him, “Lovi, just let me go. I’m not a baby anymore, I can take care of myself.”

Lovino scoffed, gently taking the younger's wrist in a loose hold, "This is taking care of yourself?"

Feliciano snatched his arm away, scooting back across the floor until his back hit the bookshelf, "That was my fault, I won't slip up again."

"Your fault?" Lovino asked incredulously.

With a sharp nod, Feliciano said, "Yes, my fault."

Lovino's expression was a confused mix of disbelief, anger, and horror. He looked like he wanted to move closer to where his brother had retreated, but he chose against it after seeing the guarded look on his face. Instead he glanced over his shoulder, presumably at the small group that stood a ways off, before turning back with a conflicted look, "This isn't… no, that wasn't your fault."

Feliciano scoffed, "I'm not going to argue with you, I've got to go." With great difficulty, he stood. He needed to get out of here before the instinct that begged him to run away with his brother overpowered his fear of being caught.

Lovino stood as well, "Hold on, you're not going anywhere."

"Yes, I am. Leave me alone." Feliciano huffed, trying to push past his brother.

But Lovino put a hand out to stop him before he could take a single step forward, "Listen, I need you to at least hear me out."

Feliciano shook his head. He knew that if he let his brother speak then his resolve would be completely broken, "I really need to go, goodbye Lovi."

He put his head down and tried to sidestep his brother, biting his lip to stop the crying fit that he felt coming on. However, Lovino simply moved to block him, "Would you stop that?"

"Just let me go, you're making this too hard." Feliciano begged.

Lovino crossed his arms, "If you really think you can get away by being stubborn, we're gonna be here for a while."

And that was precisely the problem. Feliciano knew that if it came down to a war of attrition, he was going to lose. Badly. There was no viable way for him to escape, and the longer he was stuck standing off against his brother, the greater the chance that he'd be caught when he inevitably had to go back.

With a long-suffering sigh, Feliciano realized that he had no choice. He could hear what his brother had to say, but he would stand firm in his decision.

At least he hoped.

"Fine, what do you want?" Feliciano huffed in an attempt to sound displeased, although he couldn't completely mask the slight wobble in his voice.

Seemingly satisfied that his words were going to be considered, Lovino let his shoulders relax and said in a much softer voice, “I just want you to understand that you don’t have to give yourself up to make this end.”

It was predictable, but Feliciano still found himself floundering for a suitable response, “You don’t know that. He promised that he’d leave you alone if I went back to Italy.”

Lovino snorted, “And you believed him?”

Feliciano’s shoulders scrunched up in defense, “Well he did, didn’t he?”

With a bewildered shake of the head, Lovino lifted up the front of his shirt to reveal his abdomen. It was faint, almost imperceptible, but his skin was tinted a sickly yellow. He let the younger gawk in muted horror for a few fleeting moments before he let his shirt cover the bruising once more. Lovino put his hands on his hips and stared his brother down, “The motherfucker cornered me, so tell me again why in the hell you believed him.”

Feliciano shook his head, trying to deny what he just saw. He didn’t want to believe that his sacrifice was in vain, that he had really been deceived so easily, “I-I don’t… but-”

“What, you don’t believe me?” Lovino huffed.

“No, it’s not that.” Feliciano breathed, putting his head down to pick loosely at his nails. Truth be told, he knew that this was exactly the kind of move their father would pull. Still, he had thought that he could trust him on this one thing. After all, Feliciano had given in and was willing to do anything the man said in order to slip away. He would have gone silently, so why did Cristiano choose to still go after his brother?

God, how could I be so stupid?

Lovino watched him carefully as the younger mentally kicked himself. After a beat of tense silence, he finally sighed and said gently, “I know that face, stop blaming yourself for this.”

But it was his fault. Really, he should have known that Cristiano’s word meant nothing, and of course Feliciano had to fall for it. Maybe it was due to his naivety, or maybe it was just plain fear, but he honestly thought he had protected his brother.

“Look, I know you were trying to do the right thing, but there’s another way out of this.” Lovino tried to reason.

Sniffling softly to himself, Feliciano looked down in resignation, “Please just let me go.”

Lovino gaped, “You still want to go back?”

No.

Feliciano nodded, biting at his lip as he tried to organize his thoughts. His father hadn’t kept his word, true, but it wouldn’t matter once they were back in Italy. If he backed out now, then he knew that his brother would be targeted all over again. The situation would only be

exacerbated, and he was fearful of the consequences. After all, Cristiano was willing to burn him over skipping class, so what would be the punishment for trying to run away?

He really didn't want to find out, "I'm sorry, but I can't risk it."

Lovino suddenly clapped his hands on the younger's shoulders, craning his neck to force their eyes to meet, "Risk what? Feli, we can put that piece of shit in prison where he can't touch either of us."

Feliciano's breath hitched, snapping his eyes up in shock, "What?"

"Look at you," Lovino grumbled, "I think it's clear that you're not in a good place with him."

He looked down at his own slight frame, still resolutely avoiding that horrid mark on his wrist. He supposed that the evidence would be overwhelming, but it was still an incredible risk. Feliciano wanted with all his heart to break free, but he was desperately scared of what would happen if it went wrong.

With a shuddering breath, Feliciano shrugged away the grasp on his shoulders, "I'm sorry, I can't."

I can't trust that we'll win.

Lovino remained undeterred, "You're just being used, do you really want to keep living like this?"

Feliciano closed his eyes, trying to ignore the whispers in his mind that told him that his brother was right, "Even if I am being used, I don't want to be the reason that you're hurt when we lose."

"Why are you so convinced that we'll lose?" Lovino mumbled under his breath, almost to himself.

But Feliciano felt inclined to answer him, feeling the beginnings of anger take hold, "Because we always lose! *Mamma* didn't want us, and neither did grandpa. The only thing we seem to do is lose, and I'm going to end it!" he shouted.

Lovino seemed shocked by the outburst, putting his hands up in a placating gesture, "We can end this together, just listen to me."

"No, I'm done." Feliciano felt his breathing pick up again. "We can't get away Lovi, just let me do this."

"But we can!" Lovino implored, "And you're not going anywhere, we're not done here."

Feliciano rolled his eyes, physically pushing past Lovino to stomp away.

"Feli, wait!" he scrambled to catch up with his brother, but Feliciano was already halfway to the stairwell.

Just let me go! He mentally lamented, fighting tears as he tried to get away.

Feliciano would have escaped — *just a few more steps!* — but an unforeseen obstacle stepped directly in his path, “You wouldn’t leave without saying goodbye, would you?”

With a gasp of surprise, Feliciano looked up and was shocked to find the kindly woman he just so recently met smiling sweetly down at him. She looked flippant, like she wasn’t barring his only escape route and this really was just a normal encounter. He was stunned, but was miraculously able to choke out a confused, “Miss Elizabeta?”

“What a polite young man!” she squealed in delight, “But there’s really no need for that, just ‘Elizabeta’ is fine.”

But he couldn’t respond because the short encounter had given Lovino enough time to catch up, and this time Antonio was trailing shortly behind him. Feliciano was now surrounded, Gilbert the only person missing (he had no idea where the albino had run off to). He felt cornered, but there was nowhere for him to go.

Dio, stop wasting your time on me, just let me go!

He barely suppressed the urge to hunch over in despair, hating this horrible feeling of being trapped. His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides, and he couldn't figure out if he wanted to lash out or break down.

Lovino must have sensed his growing distress because he took a step back to give him more room, but that didn’t stop him from launching into a hurried explanation, “Look, we can get you out, but I really need you to work with us.”

Feliciano shook his head, his heart beating madly in his chest, “Why won’t you just leave me alone?”

“Because you’re my brother!” Lovino suddenly yelled, leaning forward with pleading eyes. “Because you don’t deserve to be abused, because we’re in this together!”

Antonio nodded vehemently at his side, “We’re family, all of us, and we won’t abandon you.”

The desperate pleading was getting to be too much, and Feliciano was feeling more than a little overwhelmed, “It would be easier if you just let me go.”

Lovino laughed humorlessly, “You’re right, it would be easier, but when have we ever done things the easy way?”

Shoulders scrunching up to his ears, Feliciano took one final stand, “Please, I just want it all to stop.”

Lovino crossed his arms, and it was clear before he even began talking that he had won, “And it’s going to stop on *our* terms, not his. I know you’re scared, honestly I’m fucking terrified, but you need to trust us, okay?”

There was nothing more Feliciano could say to that, his well of excuses having run completely dry. He looked in between his brother and Antonio, realizing that there was nothing he could say that would ever convince them to let him go. He didn't know if he felt relief of dread at the realization, so he settled on something in between, "I-I can't, what if he goes after you again?"

Lovino shook his head, "He won't have a chance, we're putting him in jail."

"But what if he gets out?" Feliciano pushed, "He'll just come back and it'll be *so* much worse, and-"

"You're not going back with him, Elizabeta's going to take you in." Lovino cut him off before those pointless 'what-if's' could work the younger into a blind panic.

Feliciano's head snapped to the side to fix the woman with a perplexed look, "What?"

Elizabeta smiled sweetly, "He's right, you're going to stay with me for a little while."

Reeling with the new information, Feliciano put his head in his hands. In the course of maybe fifteen minutes, his entire life was once again being uprooted. It was all too much, overwhelming to an extreme degree, and he just couldn't keep up with his emotions anymore.

The sudden feeling of moisture pooling in his hands made Feliciano jump, the realization that he had started crying causing him to start scrubbing violently at his eyes. It was painful, but it was preferable to the flood of emotions that threatened to drown him.

But the harsh scrubbing was put to an abrupt stop when a pair of hands gently pulled his arms to the side, "None of that now, you'll hurt yourself."

Feliciano looked up in shock, finding Elizabeta looking down at him with a warm smile. She looked over the teen's shoulder, addressing the other two baffled onlookers, "Why don't you let us chat just one on one."

Lovino shifted nervously, looking a little apprehensive at the thought of letting his brother go so soon. But Antonio threw an arm around his shoulders, steering him gently away with a nod of approval, "We'll be right over here if you need us."

WIth an annoyed pout, Lovino let himself be led away, but not without a sharp, "Fine."

Now left alone, Elizabeta turned her attention back to the fidgety teen before her, "So you're going to be staying with me for a little bit, at least that's what I hear."

Feliciano started picking loosely at his nails, completely avoiding her sharp eyes, ""No, that's just what Lovi says, but I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why do you say that?" she asked brightly, once again taking his hands in her own to put a stop to his anxious fidgeting.

Without an outlet to expel his negative emotions, Feliciano started chewing harshly at his lips. He was finding it much harder to shrug her off than his brother. His hands twitched, but

he was able to ignore the discomfort of having his hands held still in lieu of shrugging nebulously.

Elizabeta pouted at the lackluster response, “Sweetie, I can’t help if you don’t talk to me.”

His breath hitched at the little endearment, this woman’s motherly nature so inviting he almost started crying again. But he was able to control himself, and instead redirected, “How do you know Lovi?”

The abrupt change of subject wasn’t missed by Elizabeta, but she rolled with the new line of conversation, “We used to work together. Actually, I thought you were Lovino when I first saw you — you two could be twins!”

Feliciano smiled faintly, “Yeah, we get that a lot.”

She seemed heartened by the response, releasing one of his hands to loosely cup his cheek. The action caused him to suddenly look up, finding that Elizabeta was smiling with all the benevolence of a proud mother looking after her child, “There you are, dear. You have such lovely eyes, I wish you would keep your head up.”

Feliciano’s lip quivered at the soft words. Everything about this woman screamed patience and kindness, her smile so genuine that he knew her lips would never lie to him. The support that just that smile offered was intensely gentle, yet ferociously protective at the same time. Maybe it was because she was a woman, or maybe it was because of her motherly demeanor, but in that moment Feliciano wanted with all his heart to trust her.

He fought to maintain eye contact, but in the end he had to turn away, "I'm sorry, but I really should get going now."

Elizabeta sighed heavily, "Such a pity, I was so excited to talk to you."

Feliciano frowned, for some reason not wanting to disappoint this woman, "Oh, uh I guess I can talk for just a little bit, but I do need to go soon."

With a bright smile, Elizabeta nodded, "Of course dear, I just wanted to let you know that I would be more than happy to take you in."

"I-I know, but I really can't." Feliciano mumbled, feeling his resolve weaken when she swiped away a stray tear with the hand that still cupped his face.

"Am I so horrible to be around?" she asked softly, almost like she was hurt.

Feliciano looked up in shock, already vehemently shaking his head, "No, it's just, uh..." he glanced over his shoulder to find that his brother was watching them intently, although Antonio was trying (and failing) to distract him. With a small shake of his head, he turned back to face her, “I-I think you’re really nice, but I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to watch me.”

She lowered her hand, but that smile didn’t waver, “And why’s that?”

He was back to viciously picking at his nails, missing the way Elizabeta glanced down at his hands, “I mean, my dad isn’t very nice and I don’t want him to… to hurt you too.”

Elizabeta’s face darkened for just the briefest second before that reassuring smile was back up, “Oh, you won’t have to worry about that.”

Feliciano shook his head, tears suddenly back in his eyes, “But what if he comes after you? What if he finds out where you live and tries to hurt you? What if-”

“Feli, sweetheart, I don’t mean to cut you off,” she straightened to her full height, looking directly into his eyes with a fiercely protective stare, “but I’d like to see him try.”

Feliciano’s eyes went wide. Usually such intensity was enough to send him scrambling, but for some reason he didn’t feel afraid of the blatant display of ferocity. Strangely enough, he almost felt comforted by her open confidence, and with a short nod he said, “Okay, I-I think I believe you.”

Her serious demeanor was dropped on the spot. She couldn’t have been more than an inch taller than the teen, but the way she stood with her shoulders back and head held high made her seem so much bigger, “I’m glad, and I’m very excited to get to know you.”

Feliciano blushed, suddenly finding the carpet below him fascinating, “I’m not all that interesting.”

“Not just polite, but modest too!” Elizabeta poked lightly in the center of the forehead, giggling at the way he looked up in surprise, “I hear you’re a wonderful little artist, maybe you could teach these clumsy hands of mine how to properly hold a paintbrush when you move in.”

He couldn’t help the small smile on his face, and Feliciano realized that he had started nodding without consciously meaning to. He cleared his throat, trying to rid the shakiness in his voice, “Only if you’d like.”

“Then it’s settled!” Elizabeta said brightly, waving Lovino back over to them.

With a start, Feliciano realized that he had unwittingly agreed to living with her. He couldn’t pinpoint exactly when she had convinced him, but he supposed it didn’t matter because in that moment he felt so secure in her presence that he couldn’t find it in himself to put up a fight.

Lovino approached them carefully, probably afraid of spooking his brother again. Antonio was there beside him looking equally as nervous. However, their fears were put to rest when Elizabeta addressed Lovino, “Feli is just a darling! If you two didn’t look so similar, I would have never guessed you were actually related.”

His previous anxiety was dropped at the statement, “What’s that supposed to mean, hag?” Lovino growled, although there was no real heat behind it.

Elizabeta laughed, “I think you know exactly what that means.”

Lovino rolled his eyes, but there was the faintest of smiles on his face. He shrugged off the mischievous woman's antics in favor of approaching his brother who was loosely fidgeting with his hands again.

Feliciano still felt lost, and more than a little confused. But his little talk with Elizabeta had soothed some of those frayed nerves, and even if he was still desperately scared, he had made his decision. He breathed in deeply, bringing his head up to make direct eye contact, "Um, I think Miss Elizabeta's really nice, so I guess it's okay if I live with her for a while."

Lovino froze for a split second, his eyes flitting briefly to Elizabeta before bringing back down to his brother, "Really?"

He shifted nervously from foot to foot, still not completely convinced that this was the right choice. But he was committed now, so it was with the smallest of smiles that he said, *"Sì,* I-I trust you Lovi."

Not a second after those words were uttered, Lovino surged forward to wrap his brother in a tight hug, *"Oh grazie a Dio."*

Feliciano gasped at the sudden contact, but in the end melted into the hold. He didn't start crying again, but he was close, "I'm sorry, Lovi."

"Nothing to be sorry about." he muttered, pulling back with a relieved smile. "I promise, I'm going to explain everything to you."

"Explain what?" Feliciano asked curiously.

Lovino ran a hand through his hair, but he was smiling as he said, "I don't even know where to start."

Well that wasn't very forthcoming, but Feliciano had to push his questions to the back of his mind because there was suddenly the sound of obnoxious yelling from just a little ways off:

"What did I do?" Gilbert asked loudly, his voice echoing off the walls.

Roderich huffed, "Would you like me to list it off, or do you think you can figure it out on your own?"

"C'mon dude, you can't kick me out!" Gilbert cried indignantly.

Roderich scoffed, trying to herd the albino towards the door, "I absolutely can, this is no place for illiterate oafs like you."

"I read books!" he yelled.

With a fierce glare, Roderich pointed sharply towards the door, "Shouting is not permitted in my library, now leave before I make you leave."

Gilbert stuck out his tongue childishly, "Oh yeah? I'd like to see you try."

Feliciano looked on in mild amusement, noting the way Elizabeta smiled sweetly at him before walking towards the two feuding combatants. She pushed her way in between them, that smile not wavering in the slightest as she took Gilbert harshly by the ear and started dragging him towards the door.

Gilbert screeched, “What the hell! Stop doing that, it hurts!”

He was tapping wildly at her arm in an attempt to free himself, but her grip was unrelenting. She sent a wink Feliciano’s way, and a cheerful smile to Roderich as she dragged Gilbert away, “I’ll be outside, I just need to take the trash out.”

“What did you just call me?” Gilbert cried, his words growing softer as he was pulled down the stairs.

The last thing anyone heard was Elizabeta’s bubbly laughter accompanied by an indignant cry of, “Seriously, it fucking hurts!”

Roderich huffed in annoyance, brushing away the imaginary dirt on his shoulder before making his way towards Feliciano. He crossed his arms, although most of his annoyance had faded the moment Gilbert had left, “You’re excused for the week.”

Feliciano looked up in shock, “Oh, you don’t have to-”

“No,” Roderich held his hand up to silence him, “It has come to my attention that you have some things at home to sort out.”

That was a bit of an understatement, “Are you sure?”

Roderich nodded, smiling awkwardly as he said, “Just come back when it’s figured out, I’ll be seeing you around anyway.” With those vague words, he was gone — most likely going to fix whatever mess Gilbert had undoubtedly made.

Feliciano pondered what he meant by that, but shrugged it off when Lovino cleared his throat. His brother was looking around nervously, gesturing towards the door, “We should probably get going, we made a bit of a scene.”

With a pang, Feliciano realized that they really had stirred things up in the room and that the few people that were still present kept sneaking curious looks at them. Feliciano’s face went red in embarrassment, and he put his head down with a mumbled, “I’m sorry.”

Lovino sighed, “Stop apologizing, you didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Sorry.” Feliciano mumbled, unable to stop himself.

“Whatever, let’s just go.” Lovino muttered, throwing an arm around the younger’s shoulders.

Antonio smiled, quite content to just go along with things. He ruffled Feliciano’s hair as he said, “For the record, I missed you too.”

Feliciano nodded in agreement, “I really missed you too.”

The three ambled their way towards the stairwell and out of the building. Feliciano went tense when they stepped outside, having no idea what he was supposed to do next. He was terrified of whatever plan his brother had, terrified that it was going to go horribly wrong.

Oh God, I'm really doing this. What if I get caught? What if he goes after Miss Elizabeta. This is such a bad idea, maybe I should-

"Oi, stop thinking so much." Lovino said firmly, tightening his hold around his shoulders.

Feliciano chewed at the inside of his cheek, looking down the sidewalk to see Elizabeta and Gilbert bickering. He looked back up at his brother and Antonio, trying to steel himself before saying, "When am I going with Miss Elizabeta?"

Lovino sighed, "Hopefully tomorrow."

Feliciano eyes widened in alarm, "Does that mean-"

"That you're going back tonight?" Lovino asked sullenly, that grip around his shoulders becoming painfully tight. "Yes, but I swear to God that this is the last night you will ever spend with that piece of shit."

"Oh, okay." Feliciano audibly gulped. He looked down towards his hands, but resisted the urge to fidget. Instead he was able to quell his anxiety, choosing to trust his brother's judgement in the matter. He had been willing to stay two years with that wretched man, what's one more night?

Lovino suddenly cleared his throat, breathing in deeply before saying, "I promise I'll explain everything to you later, but you should really get going."

His heart dropped, not realizing how desperately he wanted to be back with his brother until that very moment, "I-I guess you're right."

It's getting really late, I hope he's not back yet.

Burying the paralyzing feeling of dread, Feliciano looked up with watery eyes, "What's going to happen?"

Lovino glanced at Antonio apprehensively, but the look was so fleeting that it could have been imagined, "We're going to get you out of there, now here's what I need you to do when you get back…"

And thus began a lengthy explanation of their plan. It was risky, but Feliciano couldn't deny that it was also fairly thorough. It could work, and for the first time in a long time, he felt hope flutter in his chest. He turned to walk away after a tearful goodbye, keeping his head up as he tried to hold on to that fleeting sense of confidence.

One more night, I can do this.

Chapter End Notes

I legitimately spent more time editing this than I did writing it, lord have mercy.

Anywho, I hope you liked it! Elizabeta is BEST GIRL and I will personally fight anybody on that. She freaking finessed it, like you go girl!

Lol, let me know what you think! I'm honestly so tired right now that I can't even type so I'm gonna go to bed.... so peace out I guess!

Love y'all, stay safe!

'Till next time!

Chapter 51

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano took in a deep breath, standing directly outside the backdoor. He absently patted at his front pocket as he listened carefully, straining to hear any sign of life on the other side of that thin piece of wood. Satisfied that all was silent in the little house, the teen slowly turned the doorknob and pushed it silently open. After slipping stealthily inside, Feliciano closed it, breathing a sigh of relief when he remained concealed-

"Where the *fuck* have you been?"

-or maybe not.

With a shrill yelp of surprise, Feliciano whipped around to find his father standing menacingly down the hallway. He was glaring viciously, a beer bottle gripped tightly in hand.

"Oi, I'm talking to you, *idiota."* Cristiano growled darkly when no immediate answer was forthcoming out of the frozen teen.

Snapping himself out of his distressed stupor, Feliciano stumbled desperately over his words in an effort to absolve himself, "I-I, just… I-I w-was-"

A look of immeasurable rage crossed Cristiano's face, and he suddenly launched the bottle towards his son's head.

The bottle went careening towards him, and Feliciano was just able to duck in time as the projectile smashed into the wall behind him. Shards of glass rained down on him, hitting the ground with a melodic *clink* as the fragmented pieces glinted sharply off the dull lighting of the hallway.

"What did I say about the goddamn stuttering?!" Cristiano shouted, beginning to stomp towards his son.

But Feliciano was frozen from his spot on the ground, unable to stop his words, "I-I'm s-sorry, I didn't m-mean to-"

"Fucking shut up for once in your goddamn life!" Cristiano screamed, reaching down to drag the teen up by the hair.

Feliciano brought his own hands up to try and relieve the pressure of the harsh pulling on his hair, tears gathering at the corner of his eyes at the sharp pain in his scalp. He was pulled to the side and away from the door where he was suddenly released. He would have collapsed on the ground had his father not suddenly pushed him roughly against the wall, pinning him in place.

Cristiano's eyes were glazed over in rage (and no small amount of alcohol), but his words were sharp, "You were out with your brother, weren't you?"

Amber met amber as Feliciano snapped his eyes up, knowing he'd been caught. He was stunned into silence, his heart galloping madly in his chest as he squirmed.

The silence only served to anger the imposing man more, his gaze darkening as he hissed, "You've been plotting against me."

Feliciano shook his head, still too stunned to force any words out. The hand on his chest kept him firmly in place, his father so close that he could feel the man's disgustingly hot breath on his face with every word he spoke. Feliciano turned his face away, squeezing his eyes shut as he willed himself not to shut down.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Cristiano growled, brutally shaking the younger by the shoulders, "Did you actually believe you'd get away with this?"

Once again, Feliciano shook his head. Quite honestly, he was willing to do or say anything to get out of this violent interrogation. But Cristiano wasn't giving him room to speak — not that he could really force any coherent words out at the moment anyways. The shaking on his shoulders only grew in intensity, and Feliciano was having a hard time keeping up with his father's borderline hysterical accusations.

"Is that why you gave yourself up?" Cristiano nearly whispered, his grip around his shoulders becoming unbearably painful. "You thought you could come back and try to incriminate me, yeah?"

"N-no, I-I-"

"You just don't learn, do you?" Cristiano sighed, apparently disappointed. He released that relentless grip on his shoulders, instead snatching his son's wrist in a savage hold.

Feliciano had to bite back a scream of anguish, feeling the way a finger dug viciously at the burn there. His vision went white in pain as his knees buckled beneath him, but he was held up by the hold on his arm. The torment was nearly unbearable, but he had to shove it aside to focus on what was being said:

"I don't want to hear that fucking stutter, alright?" the man huffed in annoyance, like what he was saying completely justified the way he kept his son suspended in agony.

Feliciano nodded desperately, trying to regain his footing. He had to bite down on the inside of his cheek to keep from apologizing on instinct, knowing that he would only anger his father by stumbling over his words.. That finger still dug mercilessly into the burn on his wrist, but it was with a gasp of relief that Feliciano realized that he was being pulled up to stand on his own shaky feet once more.

"God, you're pathetic." Cristiano suddenly released him, crossing his arms as he scowled down with disdain. "Because of your brother we're going to court in a couple weeks, and I think we need to clear some things up."

Hand gripped tightly over his wrist as he grappled with the pain, Feliciano fell back to rest the majority of his weight against the wall behind him. He pulled his arm to his chest, shoulders scrunching up defensively as he put his head down to shrink away. Every instinct in him begged him to run, to slip away and out of the house. But he couldn't for a number of reasons, the most prominent of those reasons being the hulking figure that towered menacingly over him.

Trapped was the singular word that ran through his head, and Feliciano desperately tried to hang onto coherency as he felt panic bubble painfully up in his chest.

Cristiano abruptly snapped his fingers mere centimeters away from Feliciano's face, causing the teen's eyes to shoot up in surprise. The man rolled his eyes at the dazed expression, "Fucking pay attention, I said we need to clear some things up."

Feliciano breathed in deeply, taking great care to say smoothly, "What things?"

"These disgusting things." Cristiano huffed, poking roughly at Feliciano's arms where a disturbing number of scars marked his skin.

He rubbed at his arms self-consciously, wondering exactly what his father was getting at.

"When you're asked about them, you're going to say that it was your grandfather that put them there." Cristiano said firmly.

"W-what?" Feliciano asked, eyes impossibly wide in shock.

Cristiano's eyes darkened at the stutter, but he didn't comment on it this time. Instead, he crossed his arms, "That senile old man smoked an awful lot, it's a damn shame he felt the need to hurt you and your brother like that."

Suddenly realizing what was going on, Feliciano started shaking his head, "H-he stopped s-smoking, and *nonno* would never do that!"

"According to you, he would." Cristiano growled, seizing the younger's wrist in a fierce hold once more. "And then there's this one."

Feliciano felt the telltale sting of tears at the back of his eyes, and he shocked himself by putting up just the slightest struggle in an attempt to reclaim his arm.

But Cristiano held firm, his gaze transfixed on the burn as he whispered, "You've always been fucked up in the head, but even I never thought you'd resort to self-harm."

Feliciano choked on a sob, now knowing exactly what his father was playing at. He was going to weaponize his struggles with mental health and pin the abuse on his deceased grandfather. Roma wasn't alive to defend himself, and the word of a mentally unstable teenager would hardly be sufficient in court. It wasn't that far of a stretch to claim that he would succumb to something like self-harm, even if Feliciano himself would never contemplate something like that. It was ugly, downright sadistic even, and he felt tears run down at his face at the utter cruelty.

Cristiano gave one final squeeze to the younger's wrist before releasing him. He straightened to his full height, glare fixed firmly in place, "I hope that cleared everything up for you, now I need you to tell me something."

Although he was still sniffling quietly to himself, Feliciano was able to open his eyes with a cautious look.

Taking a menacing step forward, Cristiano forced the smaller to push even further back into the wall. His hands hung loosely at his sides, although they would twitch every once in a while as his face suddenly twisted with cold fury, "Where the *fuck* were you tonight?"

Feliciano had hoped his father had forgotten about that. Truth be told, he really didn't have a good excuse at the ready, his mind racing for a suitable justification for his absence that night.

Oh Dio, what do I say? What do I do?

That panic he had been able to stave off came crashing back full force, and the teen could feel his chest started heaving. His father was still watching him expectantly, and Feliciano had to clap a hand over his mouth to muffle his pathetic crying when he realized that he didn't have a valid excuse.

That seemed to be all the answer Cristiano needed, his face tensing in rage as his fist went crashing into the wall, mere inches from his son's head.

Feliciano jerked violently away, unable to stop the stuttered apology that forced its way out, "I-I'm s-sorry!"

But Cristiano didn't care for any apology that the teen could offer, the man's own chest heaving as he tried to contain the urge to lash out physically. After the careless act with the cigarette, he wasn't willing to make a mindless mistake again. But there was more than one way to inflict damage, and it was with a dark smirk that Cristiano said, "You want to get out of the house, yeah?"

Feliciano was wildly shaking his head, both of his hands now over his mouth as he tried to shrink away. His body was shaking so badly he feared his knees may buckle once again, and the way that Cristiano still had his hand buried in the wall next to his head only exacerbated the disgusting feeling of being trapped.

Cristiano ignored the denial, pulling his hand out of the dent he'd created in the wall to grab his son by the arm, "Well, I'm feeling in a particularly giving mood tonight."

Feliciano was jerked forward, and he would have fallen forward had his father not been so firmly holding onto his arm. He was dragged roughly down the hallway, the crunch of glass underfoot making him cringe.

"If you wanted to get out so bad, you should have just asked." Cristiano said brightly, whipping open the back door before quite literally throwing his son out.

Feliciano crashed heavily into the ground, curling up on his side as he groaned in pain. He kept his eyes squeezed shut even as he gripped desperately at his chest when his heart threatened to explode. The world around him was fading as he slowly succumbed to his panic, the feeling of danger so potent he thought he may drown.

But cutting sharply through the fuzziness of his downward spiral, Cristiano's growling voice came through, “You will not leave the backyard, got it?”

“S-sì.” Feliciano gasped, curling up further as his words refused to cooperate.

Grunting in apparent satisfaction, Cristiano smirked, “See you tomorrow.”

The resounding *bang* of the back door made Feliciano flinch away, but he had more pressing matters to deal with.

Like the fact that he was being forced to sleep outside.

All night.

In the dead of autumn.

Feliciano could already feel a biting chill run up his spine, the sun long gone at this hour. The temperature was only going to drop from this moment on, and his tears already felt like icy rivulets that clawed painfully down his cheeks.

I’m going to freeze.

At the thought, a violent shiver ran up his frame although the reaction was swallowed up by the fact that his entire body was shaking from the stress of the encounter. He wished he would just pass out, or even dissociate — at least then he wouldn’t have to grapple with this horrible reality.

But alas he couldn’t seem to detach himself from the situation, and he gripped at the grass under him in a desperate attempt to stay grounded. His father hadn’t bothered to turn on the back light, leaving Feliciano more or less engulfed in darkness. He felt like he was floating, the gentle glow from the distant city the only thing that kept him tethered.

Feliciano suffered silently through his panic, trying to mentally talk himself down through the attack. It worked after a time, and he was slowly able to uncurl and push himself up on shaky arms. He looked around with watery eyes, feeling so exhausted that he had half a mind to collapse back on the cold dirt below him and let his body succumb to the numbing chill.

Shaking his head to dispel such traitorous thoughts, Feliciano half-crawled, half-dragged himself closer to the house. He pushed himself against the outside wall, wrapping his arms around his knees. He honestly couldn’t tell if the sporadic tremors that ripped through his frame were the lingering effects of his earlier panic or a result of the crisp air that had already numbed the tips of his ears. Even his fingers felt icy to the touch, and Feliciano tucked his hands towards his middle in a futile attempt to retain his ebbing body heat.

He closed his eyes, settling down for a long night. However, right before he could shut down, Feliciano suddenly remembered something. He dug around in his pocket, retrieving a device that could very well be his deliverance.

Feliciano gripped his brother's cellphone in a white-knuckled grip, shaky hands fumbling clumsily with the device as he ended the recording. Lovino had explained that Gilbert had come up with this particular plan, the ability to get solid evidence of the abuse too enticing to pass up. Even if the whole confrontation had been unpleasant (if that wasn't the understatement of the century), they had at least gotten something out of it.

Smiling softly to himself, Feliciano dried the last of his tears with the back of his hand. He tucked the phone safely back in his pocket, curling in on himself in an effort to stay warm. He hoped that the recording of the encounter had captured enough to seal Cristiano's fate, although he wouldn't know until he had time to review the footage.

One more night, that's it.

It may be the longest night of his life, but Feliciano was determined to get through it. The comments Cristiano had made about pinning the abuse on his grandfather was disturbing, and the way he was planning to exploit his struggles with mental health was just disgusting. At the very least, they knew what defense he was going to use.

Feliciano sighed heavily to himself, his eyes drooping dangerously. He was tired, plain and simple. However, drifting off in the biting cold was as difficult as it sounded, and he resigned himself to a largely sleepless night.

With that in mind, Feliciano curled up even tighter as he looked forward to tomorrow — if only it wasn't so far away.

Last night, then I'm free.

The thought warmed his chest, and even if it wasn't enough to physically ease the wretched chill, it ignited in him a spark of hope that was enough to sustain him all night long.

Chapter End Notes

Ayooo, sorry this one is a tad shorter but oh well!

Once again, I am prepared for the anger in the comments - the amount of threats y'all have thrown at Cristiano already is so entertaining and I'm honestly here for it. Feli, my poor baby, I am so sorry. BUT I guess Gilbert did have an awesome plan, yeah? Finally some hope - you love to see it.

Lol thanks so much for reading, you guys are so wonderful. Hope you liked it, lemme know what you think (and feel free to hurl your profanities and anger once again lmaooo)

Love y'all, please please please stay safe out there!

'Till next time!

Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano hadn't taken two steps into his literature class when a sharp voice demanded, "What's wrong?"

He jumped at being addressed so suddenly, looking down meekly when Ludwig continued in his harsh staring. He walked slowly to his desk and sat, eyes downcast as the class babbled mindlessly around him. Feliciano fidgeted loosely with his hands, feeling so impossibly tired it was a wonder he didn't collapse right then and there, "Nothing's wrong, I just didn't sleep very well."

Ludwig glared in disbelief, "Alright, now what's the truth?"

Feliciano sighed heavily at being called out, closing his eyes to feel just a moment of relief, "I am telling the truth. Things weren't very good last night."

"Things?" Ludwig pushed in concern, eyes suddenly scrutinizing every inch of the fidgety teen he could see, "What *things?"*

Unconsciously bringing a hand to grip his wrist, Feliciano trained his eyes on the desk in front of him as he battled with himself, "Uh, I'm not sure if I should say or not."

Ludwig didn't miss the way he flinched when his hand met the bandaid, fixing a pointed look down at his restless hands, "What's wrong with your wrist?"

Feliciano bit at his lip, wondering if he should actually tell the blond or not. On a normal day, the answer would be an easy *no,* but today wasn't a normal day. No, today was the day he would be freed from that awful man he called a father. Apparently he had been reported which meant that an arrest was going to be made at some point today. While they couldn't detain Cristiano for more than a few days, they could remove him from his custody until the court case was through — and apparently that was going to be happening sooner rather than later.

So, with that in mind, Feliciano looked up to face Ludwig as he said evenly, "I was burned."

Ludwig sucked in a sharp intake of breath, "You were?"

Feliciano nodded, beginning to pick at his nails as some of his boldness began to fade, "Yeah, but I'm okay now."

"I'm not sure if I believe that." Ludwig huffed shortly, crossing his arms with a well-meaning glare..

"Of course you don't." Feliciano muttered, hugging his middle when a particularly harsh shiver ripped through his frame.

The glare Ludwig had been wearing began to fade, his expression looking increasingly worried, “Are you cold?”

“U-uh, well…” Feliciano mumbled, unable to help the stutter. Truth be told, he was freezing after spending the entirety of the night outside. He couldn’t seem to shake the brutal chill that froze his core, and the way he was dragged back into the house that morning left his skin crawling from the harsh way he’d been handled. Feliciano sighed, knowing he couldn’t hide this from Ludwig, “I’m, uh, actually *really* cold.”

Ludwig eyebrows shot up, shocked that his question had been met with honesty, but he was quick to shrug it off and instead cast an appraising eye over the shivering Italian, “Why are you so cold?”

Feliciano’s teeth began to chatter, that wretched chill not abating in the slightest, “I-I maybe, k-kind of slept outside last night?”

There was a moment of shocked silence that was exchanged between the two of them, although Ludwig was quick to snap out of it with an incredulous, *“What?”*

“Sorry.” Feliciano mumbled, looking down to fidget loosely with his hands. Another shiver tore through his frame, and his eyes felt so heavy with sleep that it was a marvel that he hadn’t passed out yet. The burn on his wrist throbbed dully, and the nauseating thump of a piercing headache was forming right at the base of his skull. He was miserable, and he knew that his dishevelled state made that fact embarrassingly evident.

There was a heavy sigh to the side, but Feliciano kept his gaze fixed on his hands. He was ashamed that he’d been reduced to a timid, stuttering mess over the last couple of weeks, his already dubious sense of confidence having been obliterated. Lately he’d been picking so harshly at his fingertips that they had started to bleed, the stress of living at home becoming too much for him to handle.

But it’s alright, I’m not going back.

Rubbing away the sudden moisture at his eyes, Feliciano swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat as he finally looked back up with a shaky smile.

He wondered just how bad he really looked when Ludwig’s frown only deepened, “I want you to be honest with me.”

That wasn’t a good sign, but Feliciano nodded anyway, “What is it?”

“Are you okay?”

It was such a simple question, but Feliciano was disheartened to find that he was still floundering for an answer, “I-I, um…”

Back to picking harshly at his nails, Feliciano felt his heart begin to pound painfully in his chest. He knew the answer, the suffering he’d endured so great he feared he’d never feel okay again. Still, his breath caught in his throat when he realized that such a straightforward, yes

or no question had caught him by surprise. He opened his mouth to respond, but snapped it closed after recognizing that a lie sat at the tip of his tongue. Ludwig had asked for honesty, and he wanted to give it. So with a shuddering breath, Feliciano opened his mouth to speak…

… only to choke on a sob.

He clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle the sound, but it was hopeless. His shoulders hitched up painfully as his lungs spasmed, any attempt to convince anybody that he was fine obliterated by each cry that tore loose. Distantly he noted that the class was beginning to stare, and he could feel his face burn in embarrassment. Feliciano buried his face in his hands, suddenly overcome with the weight of everything that's happened since the death of his grandfather.

"Okay, maybe that was a bad question." Ludwig mumbled, trying to coax Feliciano out of his desk and onto his feet. The blond glared at the classroom, daring them to continue in their rude staring as he was finally able to get the distraught teen to start shuffling towards the door.

Feliciano kept his face covered as he was led out of the room, his chest spasming painfully as hot tears pooled in his hands. He could hardly see where they were going, the sudden sound of the bell only adding to the disoriented feeling as he yelped in surprise.

"You're alright, c'mon." Ludwig said softly, winding them down a hallway and into a secluded part of the school. Eventually they arrived at what had to have been the very back of the building, an emergency exit marking the end of the hallway.

It was darker here with no windows, and Feliciano could feel some of the tension in his shoulders drain. He was no longer actively crying, surprisingly able to defeat the brief moment of despondency. He hadn't broken down, but if he was left to flounder in that classroom, he had no doubt that he'd have been driven to yet another crying fit.

Feliciano was sniffling quietly to himself, intent on thanking Ludwig for his quick thinking. However, the blond didn't give him a chance, instead directing him to sit against the wall.

Both teens made themselves comfortable on the cold tile, the faint buzzing of the fluorescent lights above really the only noise to disturb the tense peace. Feliciano pulled his knees to his chest, resting his chin on top of them. He felt Ludwig shift next to him, but the blond made no move to touch him in any way. With one last sniffle, Feliciano realized that he was the one that was going to have to break his silence first, "I'm sorry."

Ludwig sighed heavily, "Why? You didn't do anything."

Feliciano shrugged, not really having an explanation besides the fact that he felt the need to apologize — it was instinctual. He tucked his head down, his forehead now pressing into the tops of his knees, "That was embarrassing."

There was another sigh, "Do you want to talk about it?"

“Uh, well…” Feliciano mumbled, looking back up to face the blond directly. He found genuine concern in those deep blues, not that he had really expected anything else. Still, it was comforting, so with a short nod Feliciano said, “I-I just got a little overwhelmed I guess.”

“Does this have to do with last night?” Ludwig asked carefully.

As if suddenly remembering that he was actually freezing, Feliciano felt another shiver run up his spine, “A little, b-but lately everything’s been t-too much.”

With a short nod, Ludwig threw an arm around the smaller’s shoulders and pulled him into his side, “What do you mean by that?”

Feliciano all but melted into the blond’s side, warmth spreading throughout his body in a way that almost felt foreign after the miserably cold night he had spent outside. He simply sat in quiet relief, eyes drifting closed as he was lulled into a relaxed stupor. He hadn’t slept well (or at all) last night, so it took his exhausted brain a few more dazed seconds to realize that he had been asked a question. He peeled his eyes open, deciding he could tell the whole truth this time, “It’s just… I mean, I’ve t-tried so hard to be normal, but something *always* has to happen.”

Ludwig nodded in apparent understanding, prompting him to continue with a gentle, “Yeah?”

“Yeah, and I’m so *sick* of it.” Feliciano confided, tears in the corners of his eyes once more. He raised his watery gaze up as he tried to explain, “I-I want to get better. I want to eat again, I want t-to stop stuttering, I want to stop crying, a-and I want to stop panicking!”

His tone was getting increasingly agitated, and Ludwig’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. He opened his mouth to say something, but Feliciano was quicker:

“I just want to be normal.” he was starting to cry again, the fact only adding to his growing distress. “I-I want to hang out with my friends, I want to get to know you better and have a r-real relationship!”

“I want those things too.” Ludwig breathed, tugging the ranting teen closer to his side.

But Feliciano wasn’t quite finished, “I just hate this, so much, and I know that I-I’m not going back to *him,* but I-I’m afraid that I won’t *ever* get better.” he lamented brokenly, turning to bury his face into Ludwig’s side.

“You will get better, though.” Ludwig breathed, patting Feliciano awkwardly on his back.

With a wry little laugh, Feliciano shook his head. He didn’t give a verbal answer, instead opting to cry silently against the blond’s shoulder.

By way of response, Ludwig simply tightened his grip around the little Italian, hoping to offer his silent support. He recognized that Feliciano was too distraught to really hear his words, so he simply waited.

Feliciano was grateful for the patience, trying to bring his pathetic crying to a stop. The short outburst was just scratching the surface of the deep well of misery and self-hatred he'd been burying since all of this had started. He wanted to go on, to scream until he'd expunged all of the negative thoughts and emotions that settled heavily in his chest, but he couldn't bring himself to. So instead he made the conscious effort to once again bury those feelings, biting his lip to keep from launching into another embarrassing rant.

The horrid crying slowly devolved into stuttering breaths, and then further to imperceptible sniffles. Feliciano scrubbed at his eyes, trying to erase all evidence of the grief that had consumed him. He looked back up at Ludwig, very nearly averting his gaze as he whispered, "Sorry, I'm okay now."

Ludwig nodded slowly, scrutinizing every inch of the smaller. He took in the dark smudges under his eyes which was further accentuated by the burning red from his earlier crying, the way he still shook from apparent cold, and finally his eyes drifted to the bandage on his wrist. He cleared his throat, deciding to indulge his curiosity while Feliciano was still answering with some honesty, "Not to bring up bad memories, but is your wrist okay?"

Feliciano glanced down at the spot where that disgusting mark marred his skin. To say he was self-conscious about it was a bit of an understatement. He had never really felt an overbearing sense of shame about his scarring — Roma had made sure of that — but lately, he couldn't seem to shake the feeling that he was damaged. The new burn on his wrist tormented him, both physically and mentally, and he slowly brought a hand to grip his own arm in a tight hold, "U-uh, not really."

"Does it hurt?" Ludwig asked, shifting to really inspect the spot.

But Feliciano kept a hand clapped resolutely over the injury, "Yeah, b-but I'll be fine."

Ludwig clearly begged to differ, but he let it go with a grumbled, "If you say so."

Pulling his wrist protectively to his chest, Feliciano nodded by way of response. Absently he realized that he was skipping class again, something that he had sworn he would quit doing (and especially after being burned because of it). But he really couldn't find it in himself to care, the fact that he was finally *leaving* that awful man filling him with a level of boldness that he wished he could maintain.

They sat in silence, some of the high emotions that gripped Feliciano only minutes prior having dissipated. He slumped awkwardly against the blond, his eyes burning from exhaustion as he started nodding off. It went on like that for a while, an amused chuckle from Ludwig breaking up the easy peace, "Just sleep already."

Feliciano looked up wearily. He knew what kind of answer he would receive, but he still felt compelled to say, "But class-"

"-is not important." Ludwig huffed, but a faint smirk still painted his features. "I'm not going anywhere, get some rest."

With a faint smirk of his own, Feliciano responded with a soft, "Yes, sir."

Truth be told, he was completely drained. The prospect of sleep was far too enticing to pass up, so Feliciano didn't offer any more protests. Instead, he settled down more securely into the blond's side as he pushed any lingering negativity to the back of his mind. He wanted to get better, for real this time, and he supposed that taking a nap was a good start.

The classroom was abuzz with its typical sense of excitement and lightheartedness, the chemical aroma of paint settling heavily in the room. Feliciano was content to soak in the atmosphere, refreshed after his impromptu nap. He coated his brush in a shining hue of bright emerald, delicately swiping the paint across his canvas. It was cathartic, calming, and Feliciano felt a wave of hard-won peace hit him when he inspected his own painting.

"What a lovely landscape." hummed a velvety voice.

Feliciano jumped, turning in his seat to find Francis leaning over his shoulder, "O-oh, thank you."

Francis grinned widely, eyes still fixed on the rolling hills the teen had depicted, "Is this somewhere important to you?"

Looking down to scrutinize his own work, Feliciano nodded, *"Sì,* this was where I grew up, but I-I'm having a hard t-time remembering a lot of it."

Nodding in understanding, Francis started backing away, "Well, I think you've captured the amazing scenery just perfectly."

Feliciano shrugged, not sure if he'd ever be able to capture just how captivating the countryside of his home was. Anybody could paint a landscape, but being able to accurately articulate the nostalgia that such a place inspired was proving to be a difficult feat indeed.

"Artwork aside, I need to speak with you after class." Francis suddenly announced, although he was cautious to keep his voice down.

Feliciano looked up at that, feeling a sense of apprehension at the words. He remembered how poorly his last one-on-one interaction with his teacher had gone, and he wasn't too eager to repeat the experience.

Apparently, Francis was of the same mindset, "It will only be for a few minutes, no questions this time." he smiled reassuringly.

Swallowing around the growing sense of anxiety, Feliciano nodded his acquiescence. As if on cue, the bell sounded off. The room cleared out in seconds, and with a brief wave to Kiku, Feliciano started picking absently at his nails in anticipation of whatever conversation his teacher had in store for him.

Francis smiled, although the expression was tinged with something akin to guilt. He took a seat across from the fidgety teen, trying (unsuccessfully) to capture his elusive eyes as he said, "I would like to apologize."

Feliciano whipped his head up, his curiosity piqued, “Apologize?’

“I am sorry, but I have not been honest with you.” Francis sighed, fitting his chin snugly in his hand as he shook his head sadly to himself.

Nobody ever is. Feliciano thought wistfully, but nodded anyway to silently prompt the man to continue.

He did after flipping his silky blond locks dramatically to the side, although his tone of voice was genuinely remorseful, “I admit that I’ve been made aware of your… *situation,* and I have been working with a close friend of mine to help build a case.”

‘A close friend’ could only mean Gilbert, and Feliciano could honestly say he wasn’t all that surprised. He had suspected something when his teacher had suddenly taken a keen interest in him, asking questions that were far too specific to his situation. Feliciano couldn’t find it in himself to condemn the man in front of him for his actions, instead choosing to nod with a mumbled, “Figures.”

Francis grinned sheepishly at the tone he was met with, though he was far from apologetic for his actions, “With that out of the way, I would like to inform you that your father has been arrested.”

Although he knew that was going to happen today, it still caught Feliciano by surprise. His breath caught in his throat as he whispered a bewildered, “Really?”

“Oui, I reported him this morning with the evidence I’ve compiled.” Francis said delicately, watching the teen carefully for some sort of reaction.

It came in the form of a shaky smile, although it was tinged with blatant fear. There was no going back now, and if things went awry then Feliciano honestly feared for his life, “O-okay.”

Francis breathed a sigh of relief, apparently expecting a more dramatic reaction than he’d been met with. He smiled even if he was still apprehensive himself, “That being said, you have been excused from school. There’s a lovely woman outside waiting for you, so you’re free to go.”

Feliciano’s eyes widened in surprise, the implications of his father’s arrest beginning to strike home. The realization that this was really happening, and that this could really be the start of his liberation from that horrid man was enough to bring tears to his eyes. He swiped away the tears that threatened to fall, tired of the constant crying, as he stood from his seat.

Francis stood as well, smiling softly as he watched the teen try to get a handle of himself, “Once again, I apologize for my dishonesty. I do not expect you to even like me, but know that my door is always open.”

Shaking himself out of his shocked silence, Feliciano fixed his teacher with a grateful smile. Despite his deceptive actions, Feliciano thought that he could trust Francis. The man had

been trying to help in the end, so it was with a shuddering breath that he mumbled a heartfelt, “Thank you.”

“But of course.” Francis said with a flippant wave of his hand. He flipped his hair as he strutted away, calling over his shoulder with an amused, “You better get going, it’s impolite to keep a lady waiting.”

With a breathy little giggle, Feliciano nodded and rushed out of the room. He was quick to gather his things and head outside into the frigid air. He felt that awful chill pierce through him, but he was able to shake off the discomfort to instead jog his way over to a red car with a familiar figure waving excitedly inside.

Elizabeta unlocked the door, smiling at the teen as he settled into the passenger seat, “Feli! How was your day?”

Feliciano breathed a sigh of relief when the warm air chased away the cold, turning to the kindly woman with a soft smile of his own, “It was alright, thank you.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Elizabeta responded, shifting the car in gear before pulling out of the school’s small campus. She cleared her throat, glancing over to the passenger side with a mischievous little giggle, “Now, let’s get you home.”

Feliciano’s breath hitched, realizing that he was finally going to a place he could maybe consider a home. At the very least, it was somewhere safe, that warm feeling of security already washing over him. It was overwhelming, but for once not in a bad way. He felt breathless, but nonetheless was able to whisper, “Yeah, I think I’d like that.”

Chapter End Notes

I LIVE!

Lmao, so sorry for the impromptu break, but there was a wedding, and work, and excuses, excuses, so on and so forth...

Anyway, I've returned so get lit. I hope you liked this, Feli can (hopefully) start to heal... author willing... lol for real, poor child deserves some happiness.

okay, so I am pleased to announce that THERE'S NOW FANART FOR THIS FIC SO GET FREAKING HYPE Y'ALL. IT'S SO GOOD, OMFG IT'S CUTE AND I'M IN LOVE~.

ahem sorry about the outburst, but for real it's amazing and I have the link for it so give this wonderful artist all the love and good vibes they deserve!!!!

https://sneakydraws.tumblr.com/post/620658165649932288/ok-so-i-know-i-just-said-im-too-busy-to-draw

Alrighty, that's all I got! Let me know what ya'll think, and thanks so much for being like the sweetest people ever in the comments... seriously, makes my day.

Love y'all!

'Till next time!

Chapter 53

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino sat with his arms crossed firmly across his chest, irritation marking his every movement, every intake of breath. He glared heatedly at the multitudes of documents and manilla folders scattered haphazardly across the desk in front of him. The taut atmosphere was suffocating, the only sound to cut through the tense silence was the incessant *tick* of a clock that hung crookedly on the wall.

On the opposite side of the desk, smiling sheepishly at him, sat Tino. The small lawyer was back in his office after weeks of ignoring the irate Italian before him, and Lovino was intent on making his displeasure known with the intensity of his glare alone.

Tino sighed guiltily, breaking the silence with a meek, “I suppose we have some things to talk about.”

“Really? You think?” Lovino asked, voice thick with sarcasm.

“If you’re angry with me, I completely understand.” Tino said softly. “I didn’t want to do it, but I wasn’t going to let this case go.”

Lovino rolled his eyes, still irritated beyond belief about being ignored. The worthlessness he’d felt at being left so helpless, so unable to have any agency in his own life still sat heavily in his chest. Just because he was no longer sulking didn’t mean the mental distress he’d felt had completely faded, “Ya know, the only reason I’m not flipping shit right now is because you’re my best chance of getting my brother back.”

“And that’s totally justified, but I do hope we can overcome this and-”

“Oh, cut that bullshit out.” Lovino huffed, not wanting to hear the robotic apologies that he’d probably prepared days in advance. “I don’t hate you or anything, so stop walking on eggshells.”

Tino relaxed a bit at the words, “I’m glad, but I would like to apologize first.”

Lovino raised one of his eyebrows, “Seriously?”

“Of course!” Tino nodded emphatically. “I didn’t realize the full situation, and looking back I wish I would have spoken to you first.”

“Damn right.” Lovino grumbled.

“That being said, I don’t apologize for keeping this case from dropping.” Tino said firmly. “I regret causing you unnecessary stress, but I didn’t want you to throw everything away before I could figure out what was going on with your inheritance.”

And Lovino supposed that the lawyer had a point there. He had very nearly given up out of fear, a fact that still tore at him. Had Gilbert and Tino not conspired against him, then he could have doomed his brother to a very grim fate indeed.

Still, nobody could hold a grudge quite like Lovino, so with one more childish huff he mumbled, “I *guess* it’s fine. Just promise me we’ll get my brother back.”

The resulting silence didn’t bode well with Lovino, some of his irritated mask slipping away when he noted Tino’s hesitation. The lawyer rubbed tiredly at his eyes, looking back up with a weary sigh, “I’m not in the business of making promises.”

That didn’t sound good, and Lovino uncrossed his arms for the first time, “What the hell do you mean by that?”

Tino struggled to organize his words, trying to put things as delicately as possible, “We’re going to court in two weeks, and I need to prepare you for the chance that we’ll lose.”

Lovino paled, “But you said-”

“I’m not saying your brother will go back to your father.” Tino reassured, putting a hand up in a placating gesture. “I just can’t guarantee the judge will place him back in your care.”

“And why the hell not?” Lovino asked indignantly, feeling a sharp spike of fear cut through him.

Tino ignored the biting tone he’d been met with, continuing on with a carefully neutral voice, “Because your brother has problems, and you have yet to show that you can handle it.”

Lovino glared at the insinuation, “Hey, Feliciano isn’t some basket case.”

“I never said he was, but I think you have some issues you’ve never dealt with either.” Tino said pointedly.

Lovino ground his teeth, “If you’ve got something to say, just say it.”

Tino sighed loudly, but refused to back off, “I’m just being realistic here. Look, you’re nineteen years old, an abuse victim yourself-”

“Don’t call me a fucking victim.”

“-and you were arrested not all that long ago.” Tino finished.

Lovino scoffed, “What happened to all that optimism a couple weeks ago? You’re making it sound like we lost already.”

“I make this point to all of my clients, you just need to be prepared for the possibility of failure.” Tino repeated, crossing his arms with a determined expression. “I have every intention of winning this case, you just need to know that not everything goes to plan.”

“Ain’t that the fucking truth.” Lovino muttered, mentally recounting every obstacle that’d been in his way from the very beginning.

“So,” Tino chirped brightly, obviously eager to move on, “a lot’s happened since we’ve seen each other last. Do you have any questions for me?”

Lovino thought about it, realizing that he had about a million questions that he wanted to ask. But he pushed some of the useless questions away and instead started with, “Is that asshole staying in jail or not?”

“That depends, I suppose.” Tino said thoughtfully, sitting back with a contemplative look. “He’s been detained while they investigate, but they can only hold him for forty-eight hours unless they find something particularly damning.”

“Like the burn on my brother’s arm?” Lovino mumbled angrily.

“Or the video I understand he took.” Tino nodded. “Have you had the chance to watch it yet?”

Lovino shook his head, “I’m going to get my phone back after this.”

With a short nod, Tino said softly, “Good, make sure that at least most of the video is usable.”

Making a mental note to do just that, Lovino asked the next question that sat at the tip of his tongue, “So what’s up with this inheritance? Why weren’t we ever told?”

“Well,” Tino started, tapping at his chin thoughtfully, “I have a few theories, but it might have something to do with the fact that you changed your name.”

“And I’m not sorry about it.” Lovino grumbled, feeling no real remorse for his actions. It may not be a legal change, but he was quite content to shed that surname in favor of one he could be proud of.

Tino rolled his eyes in amusement, “I really don’t blame you, but it would have been easier if you’d done things legally.”

“Yeah, and when has that ever helped before?” he huffed childishly.

“You mean like it’s helping right now?” Tino deadpanned.

Lovino tried to hold onto his glare, but in the end it was hopeless. He breathed out heavily, completely deflating where he sat, “Ugh, whatever. So what exactly did my brother and I inherit?”

Tino hummed in thought, pulling out what seemed to be a copy of something. He slid it across the desk and gestured for Lovino to take it, “I managed to get a copy of your grandfather’s will, I’m sure you can read it better than me.”

Lovino picked up the document, scanning over the lines of legal jargon. It was in Italian, which was unsurprising, but it did explain the lawyer’s words, “Is this why it took you so

damn long to figure all this out?"

Tino nodded with a breathy laugh, "The language barrier did pose some problems, yes."

"Y'know, I think I know someone who could have helped with that." Lovino said mockingly, crossing his arms in annoyance. "Oh, wait! You were ignoring him."

"And I believe I already apologized for that." Tino said brightly, although there was an undertone of seriousness there.

Once again, Lovino buried his annoyance in favor of reading what he could from the document in his hands. He didn't understand a lot of the legal phraseology, but he got the gist of things, "So me and my brother now own a massive company that we have no idea how to run, am I getting that right?"

Tino nodded, "From what I understand, the business has continued its operations with some temporary leadership, but you and your brother have a legal claim to it."

Lovino scoffed, "They're really gonna let two teenagers step in and take over?"

"Probably not." Tino laughed, finding the notion absurd himself. "But you have every right to, although I bet you'll have to spend some time learning how to run it properly."

That made more sense, although the details were still rather blurry. The thought of taking over a multi-million dollar company in his grandfather's name was more than a little intimidating, so he pushed it to the back of his mind to instead focus on the matter at hand, "Fine, so what do I do next?"

Tino shrugged, "That's up to you, but if it were me I would stay in line and make sure your brother's on the same page in all of this."

Lovino nodded, taking that as his excuse to leave, "Speaking of which, I have something I need to tell him."

"Of course." Tino said, standing with an outstretched hand. "I really am sorry about all this."

He sounded like he was apologizing for more than just ignoring him, and Lovino felt something akin to appreciation. He accepted the hand that was offered with a firm shake, "Whatever, just don't ignore me again, bastard."

Tino laughed, his cheerful demeanor back up in an instant, "Trust me, I don't plan on it."

"Good." Lovino mumbled, turning on his heel to leave without another word. He had some news to break to Feliciano, and though he was excited to see his brother after weeks of being separated, he dreaded the reaction he was going to get. He didn't want to break his brother, but he deserved to know.

Shaking himself out of his dismal thoughts, Lovino pulled out a slip of paper with detailed directions written on it. Ideally, he would like to call a cab to eliminate the possibility of getting lost, but he was really hurting for cash right now. He'd taken out a loan to pay off his

misdemeanor fines, leaving him and Antonio pretty broke at the current moment. It wouldn't matter once he could lay claim to his inheritance, but that wouldn't be happening until after the court case was settled.

"Whatever." he grumbled to himself, pulling his jacket tighter around him to fight off the chill as he embarked on a ridiculously long trek through the city.

It had to have been more than an hour later when Lovino finally arrived at Elizabeta's place of residence. It was a small house in a modest neighborhood that sat just outside of the city proper, the distant glow of the city a comforting backdrop to the otherwise darkening sky. The yard surrounding the house was well-maintained, beds of flowers lining the front of the cozy little home.

Lovino ambled up the short pathway to the front door, checking the address in his hands once more to confirm he was indeed in the correct place. He breathed through the lingering nervousness in his chest before knocking sharply on the door.

He waited, rocking back and forth on his feet as he tried not to work himself up too horribly. He couldn't afford to come across as weak or unsure, not when his brother needed someone who was stable, unwavering.

Like I'm either of those things.

Lovino shook the thought out of his head, turning his attention back to the door when he heard someone approach from the other side. Despite hearing the approach, he still jumped in surprise when the door was suddenly blown wide open.

"Lovino, it's good to see you!" Elizabeta trilled brightly.

"Yeah, yeah, no need to shout." Lovino grumbled, his response decidedly less enthusiastic.

Elizabeta pouted, putting her hands on her hips, "You could try to smile a little more, you know. I'm sure it would do you some good."

"Don't tell me what to do." he huffed, but it didn't have any bite behind it.

Elizabeta laughed at the predictableness of the response, "How is it that your brother is such a sweetheart, but you're so-"

"Bitter?" Lovino finished for her, taking a step forward.

"I was going to say grumpy, but sure." she laughed, standing aside to let him inside.

Lovino rolled his eyes, but didn't offer any more sass. If it weren't for the fact that this woman had so graciously taken his brother in, he would act with much more of his usual brattiness. But as it was, he owed Elizabeta much more than he could ever give, so he followed her without comment through the small house.

It was dark inside, although not in a gloomy way. Rather, it was soothing, the dull yellow lights humming gently above. There were pictures crowded closely together along one of the walls, which were painted a stormy blue color. Their footsteps echoed dully along the dark hardwood floor, much of the interior faded with age.

Lovino followed down a long hallway, the old-fashioned layout of the home feeling comforting in a way. The living room was just as soothing, a large quilt characterised by a mosaic of cheerful colors thrown over one of the two couches.

He took everything in with curious eyes, still not spotting exactly what he was looking for, “Alright, so where’s-”

“Lovi!” chimed a bright voice, as if on cue.

Lovino jerked around in surprise, but was prevented from further reacting when his brother suddenly launched himself into his arms. He stood wide-eyed for a moment before hugging back with a soft smile, “Sheesh, don’t surprise me like that.”

Feliciano fixed him with a genuine smile, though it was shaky at best, “Sorry, I was just excited to see you.”

Lovino rolled his eyes fondly, peering back at Elizabeta who was watching everything with a soft smile, “You mind if I talk to Feli for a while?”

Elizabeta nodded, “Of course! Just call me if you need anything, okay?”

Lovino gestured vaguely with his hand, like he was shooing her away, “We won’t, but thanks I guess.”

She rolled her eyes at the characteristic rudeness, but that bright smile remained firmly in place even as she disappeared back down the hallway.

Now left on their own, Lovino gestured to the couch, “Why don’t we sit, I have something I need to tell you.”

Feliciano peered up curiously, but followed his brother to sit on the soft cushions. He immediately brought his knees to his chest in order to curl up, flopping over to rest the majority of his weight on the older. He fidgeted loosely with his hands, but didn’t voice any questions he may have had

He was quiet, but Lovino didn’t comment on it. Instead he snaked an arm around his shoulders, smiling faintly at the way his brother hummed in contentment. They hadn’t had the opportunity to spend time together in literal weeks, this fleeting moment of reprieve a wonderful taste of what they could have — what Lovino prayed they could have.

The silence persisted for just a while longer, but Lovino finally broke it with a mumbled, “How was school?”

Feliciano jut his bottom lip out in thought, still much too reserved for his usual talkative self. He mulled over how to answer the question, finally settling on, “It was okay.”

“Just okay?” Lovino pushed, hoping to coax more out of him.

Feliciano simply shrugged, his mood seeming to deteriorate further the more he thought about it, “I-I guess, but everyone’s super worried about me now.”

I am too. Lovino thought briefly, but he kept it to himself. His brother had always been social, so it was likely that he had a lot of people that had noticed his worsening condition. While it may have come from a good place, that kind of attention would be overwhelming, “Why don’t you stay home for a couple days? I think you deserve it at this point.”

“Maybe” Feliciano shrugged, his hands still twisting restlessly in his lap as he explained, “But I think that would only make it worse, a-and I don’t want people to keep looking at me.”

Lovino tightened his grip around his brother’s shoulders, knowing exactly what he was feeling. As a kid, he’d convinced everyone that the bruises and other injuries were a result of him picking fights with the bigger kids — it was part of the reason they’d been able to hide the abuse for most of their lives. Lovino remembered how people would look at him, like there was something wrong with him. He’d even played up the aggressive character people thought he was, to his ultimate detriment.

He’d messed up in the past, but Lovino was determined to be a better brother this time around, “Well what about that big, stupid blond you’re always hanging off of?”

Feliciano cracked a small smile at the description, “You mean Ludwig?”

Lovino rolled his eyes, gesturing vaguely with his hand as he said, “Whatever the potato-mucher’s called. He’s scary, right? Just make him tell people to fuck off if they stare.”

While he was still looking meekly down at his hands, Feliciano managed a breathy giggle, “I don’t think I could get Ludwig to say that, he’s too polite.”

“Then what’s the point of keeping him around?” Lovino mumbled under his breath, but the amused laughter to his side indicated that he’d been heard.

“You’re too harsh, Lovi. I’ll be fine, really I’m just overreacting.” Feliciano breathed softly, but his mood was rapidly improving.

“I think you’re entitled to overreact, especially after all the bullshit you’ve been through.” Lovino growled, pushing an irritated hand roughly through his hair. “Speaking of which, I’m going to need my phone back.”

Feliciano nodded, eyes clouding over for a brief moment as he was pulled back into some kind of memory. He was quick to snap out of it, however, and he pulled back to dig around in his pocket.

Lovino waited patiently, accepting the device when it was finally offered to him. He held his phone in a loose hold, already dreading the moment he’d have to go through the video he knew was there. But instead of lingering on the feeling, Lovino slipped it into his pocket

before pulling Feliciano into his side once more, “I’m sorry you had to do that, I know that it really sucked.”

“Um, I mean…” Feliciano trailed off, swiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. “I-it was pretty scary.”

“But you did it anyway, and I’m so proud of you.” Lovino said firmly. He had no idea what he was going to find when he went through the video, but he just knew it would be enough to make his stomach churn.

“Thanks, Lovi.” Feliciano breathed, still scrubbing softly at his eyes.

Lovino smiled down at him, bringing a hand up to run gently through his hair. He had yet to so much as touch the topic that he’d wanted to bring up since the beginning, but he knew it was time. He felt a sharp tug in his chest, though he couldn’t pinpoint what the feeling was before taking in a shuddering breath, “Uh, so I actually need to talk about something with you.”

Feliciano suddenly looked apprehensive, “Did something happen?”

“Well… kind of.” Lovino mumbled, still threading his fingers through his hair — he couldn’t tell if the gesture was more for his sake or his brother’s.

“Are we going to be okay?” Feliciano asked a bit breathlessly, the beginnings of panic edging his voice.

Realizing that the vague phrasing was only making things worse, Lovino moved to reassure, “We’ll be fine, that’s not what I meant.”

“Oh, sorry.” he mumbled.

Lovino sighed, finding this harder than he thought. He had pushed the topic to the back of his head in favor of sorting through all the drama of the last few months. Even when he was lying awake in bed, clinging pathetically to Antonio as he voiced all his fears and reservations, he hadn’t spared a single thought to his deceased mother. But now that everything was falling into place, Lovino realized that it may have been a poor decision. It was now, curled up quietly on the couch with the last real family he had left, that he realized that the sharp pain in his chest was grief.

“Lovi?” Feliciano suddenly asked.

Lovino shook himself out of his silent musings, resuming in his gentle petting when he realized he’d frozen, “Sorry, did you say something?”

Feliciano shook his head, fidgeting loosely with his hands as he mumbled, “You just looked really sad.”

He did?

Lovino scowled at the wall ahead, but the expression felt shaky at best. He wondered where this sudden feeling of longing was coming from, or when his chest had started aching with such intensity. It seemed abrupt, but distantly he wondered if he'd really been feeling this all along.

With a shuddering breath, Lovino tried to push down the feelings once again. He'd grown rather adept at that, but he just couldn't seem to shake the lingering sense of sadness, "Sorry, uh, how much do you remember *mamma?"*

Feliciano's head whipped up in surprise, the question completely throwing him, "I mean, not much. I think she might have loved us, but I can't really remember."

Did she love us?

Lovino thought she did — her words were always so gentle, her movements soft even if she'd been dissatisfied with her life. He knew he took after her, bitterness and all, and even if Lovino had no problem pointing out every reason he should resent her, he was having a difficult time putting voice to those reasons, "I think she loved us too, but-"

"She still left us." Feliciano suddenly mumbled with a surprising amount of distaste.

"Yeah," Lovino breathed, heart hammering painfully in his chest, "I guess she did."

And I still don't understand why.

The simple answer was that she'd been a victim herself, so she'd taken her life in her own hands and walked away. It was selfish, ugly even that she would just walk away, but Lovino was having a hard time faulting her for it. He was still unbelievably angry with her for the decision she'd made, but he didn't believe in speaking ill of the dead. She was gone, the hazy memories of her vague features the only thing he had left.

Lovino cleared his throat, trying to bury his emotions once more as he gripped his brother a little tighter, "You know I'm not great at this kind of stuff, so I'm going to be blunt."

"You're always blunt, Lovi." Feliciano whispered, trying to mask his growing sense of unease.

With a grimace, Lovino rested his head on the back of the couch to stare fixedly at the ceiling. He really was pretty bad at dealing with emotions, so it was with only one more moment of hesitation that he said, "She died in a car crash after she left us."

Feliciano jerked in surprise, looking up with wide eyes, "Really?"

"Yup." Lovino huffed, still adamantly refusing eye contact. He couldn't bear to see any more tears well up in his brother's eyes knowing he was the one to put them there — *again.* Feliciano couldn't handle another hit, it wasn't fair to expect him to, and Lovino wasn't sure if he could talk him out of the breakdown he just knew was coming-

"Lovi? Are you alright?"

Lovino gasped in surprise, peering shakily down to find his brother was staring at him with blatant concern. He opened his mouth to speak, but not a sound escaped his lips.

Feliciano untangled himself from the grip around his shoulders, sitting up completely so he could bring his hands up to wipe something off his brother's face, "Please don't cry, Lovi. Seriously, it'll be okay."

"What?" Lovino nearly choked, noticing for the first time that his vision had long gone blurry. He swiped viciously at his eyes, hating himself for showing weakness. He didn't know why he was even crying, but now that the tears had started he couldn't make them stop, "I'm fine, just… just give me a minute."

Feliciano floundered, not able to do much but stare in astonishment. He reached a shaky hand out and linked it with Lovino's, the only thing he could really offer.

Distantly, Lovino thought that he appreciated the gesture, but he was too focused on putting a stop to the pathetic crying to really notice. It wasn't like he was consumed by all-encompassing sobs or anything, but the silent tears that tracked delicately down his face was almost worse. He brought a single arm up to cover his face, embarrassed beyond belief.

"It's okay to cry, Lovi." Feliciano whispered, sounding rather distraught himself.

"No, this is fucking stupid." he growled, finally feeling those traitorous tears come to a stop. He didn't want to waste any more time crying over his broken family, it wouldn't change anything anyway.

Feliciano clearly disagreed, his face twisting in a light glare of disapproval, "It's not stupid. If you're sad about *mamma,* then-"

"I am *not* upset about her." Lovino hissed, even as he scrubbed away the last of the tears. "Don't worry about me, what about you?"

"Me?" Feliciano questioned, eyebrows furrowing in confusion.

"Yeah, I just told you that our mother is dead, are you okay?" he clarified, ignoring the sharp pull in his chest.

"I mean, I feel really sad about it, and I wish that we could have said goodbye first, but…" Feliciano chewed at his bottom lip, looking as conflicted as Lovino felt, "But I don't even remember what she looked like or if she really loved us, so I think I'm more worried about you right now."

Lovino nodded slowly, relieved that the news had been taken so well. Now if only he could control his own emotions, "You don't need to, I'm fine."

"You're not a very good liar, Lovi." Feliciano said with a shaky smile, but nonetheless settled back down to nestle comfortably into his brother's side.

With a scoff, Lovino let the little jab go. He instantly wrapped his arm back around the younger, all too ready to move on. He didn't want to waste any more tears on their mother —

she didn't deserve the grief that still sat heavily in his chest. With one more swipe at his eyes, Lovino banished any lingering distress in favor of dropping his head to rest atop his brother's.

Feliciano sighed heavily in relief, much of the tension leaving his body. His eyes drifted closed, the soft atmosphere relaxing him even further as he breathed, "Do you think we can visit *nonno* soon, I really miss him."

Lovino nodded, thinking they could spare some time to visit their grandfather's grave in the coming weeks. He smiled at the thought, suddenly remembering a bit of good news he had yet to deliver, "Actually, I think we should take a trip back to his farm. Y'know, that ridiculously big vineyard he lived on?"

With just the smallest of smiles, Feliciano nodded, "I would really like that."

"I think I can do you one better." Lovino huffed, smiling in anticipation of the reaction he would get. "What if I told you that we can live there when this is all over?"

Feliciano jerked in surprise, but he was held still by the arm around his shoulders, "It's not nice to say things like that, you know we can't."

"Actually, we can do exactly that." Lovino said with a wide grin. "Turns out we've got quite the inheritance."

The news was met by silence, like all of the air had been sucked out of the room. Feliciano wasn't breathing, his shoulders scrunched up to his ears as he tried to process the new information. Lovino couldn't see the look on his face, what with his head resting on top of the younger's and all, but he imagined it was blank with shock.

Finally, when it seemed the silence would go on forever, Feliciano asked in a small voice, "Lovi?"

Lovino hummed in acknowledgement, still smiling widely in his own excitement.

"Does that mean that we're gonna be alright?" Feliciano breathed, his voice bright with hope.

With a short bark of laughter, Lovino gripped his shoulders just a little tighter, "Yeah, we're going to be just fine."

They weren't quite out of the woods yet, and it was clear that they both had some deep-seated issues to work out, but at least they could face it together. Tino had said earlier that he 'wasn't in the business of making promises,' but Lovino thought that he sure as hell was, "That's a damn promise, too."

Chapter End Notes

Oh lordy, this took longer than I thought oops. Lol, thanks for your patience!

Hope you liked it, I do like nice hopeful endings to chapters!

Now, I have some more good news... THERE'S MORE FANART OMFG GUYS, GUYS IT'S SO GOOD LIKE GO AND LIKE IT!!!

https://www.instagram.com/p/CBrBHZiDJou/

Seriously though, it's so sweet that people found enough inspiration from this fic to go create something new. Please check out the link and send all the love in the world to the artist!!! Let's all support each other in this totally not-dead fandom!!!

lol, thank you guys so much for everything! Y'all are so wonderful bless up for real.

Okie, it's late af so I'm going to bed.

'Till next time!

Chapter 54

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first day hadn't gone all that well — not that Elizabeta had expected it to, but she'd hoped that she could at least get Feliciano to talk to her.

The moment Lovino left, Feliciano had pretty much gone catatonic. Elizabeta tried to coax him out of the dazed stupor, but it had proven to be a pretty fruitless endeavor.

"Feli, I need you to eat something, alright?" she had said.

Unsurprisingly, the plea had gone unanswered. Feliciano sat curled up on the couch, completely checked out with a hand clapped firmly over his wrist. The television wasn't even on, but still he stared listlessly ahead.

At a loss, Elizabeta had simply left a plate of food out for him to eat before retreating back into the kitchen. She texted Lovino, looking for answers, but only received a vague reply about how Feliciano tended to check out sometimes.

When she returned to check on the teen, she found that he'd fallen asleep entirely. The food she had left out remained untouched.

The second day wasn't much better, but at least Feliciano was making a conscious effort to socialise when he got back from school. He even went so far as to apologize for the previous day, explaining that he couldn't control those dissociated spells.

"That's quite alright, dear. I'm just glad you're feeling better." Elizabeta reassured.

"Sorry, I-I hope you didn't think I was ignoring you." he mumbled, picking harshly at his nails.

Elizabeta stepped forward, taking his hands into hers to put an end to the harsh picking. She saw the way the ends of his fingers were picked raw, in some places scabs crusted painfully around his fingertips. The worst part was he didn't even seem to be aware of the damage he was causing. She smiled sadly at the way his hands twitched when he could no longer fidget, "No, I didn't think you were ignoring me. What happened, if you don't mind telling me?"

Feliciano's eyes filled with tears, his head dropping to look fixedly at their joined hands, "I-I'm not sure, but Lovi told me that our mom was dead, s-so it might have been that."

Nodding slowly in understanding, Elizabeta tightened the hold she had on his hands, "I'm so sorry. Do you want to talk about it?''

Feliciano violently shook his head, keeping his eyes downcast as he said, "I really don't."

“Feli, can you look at me?”

He shook his head again, eyes remaining fixed on the floor below.

With a little huff, Elizabeta put a hand under his chin and gently tilted it up. His eyes went wide with shock, and something else more akin to grief. Elizabeta met the gaze with a soft smile, breathing softly, “There’s those lovely eyes of yours, I really do wish you’d keep your head up.”

He squeezed his eyes shut at the words, shaking his head roughly back and forth, “P-please stop saying th-that.”

“Now, why would I do that?” Elizabeta tutted lightly, placing both hands on his shoulders.

Feliciano sniffled, still adamantly refusing eye contact as he mumbled, “Because I-I might start crying if you keep saying stuff like that, and I-I don’t want to keep crying.”

“I know, honey.” she said softly, bringing him in for a loose hug. “We’ll get there, I promise.”

Feliciano broke at the words, gripping her back as he started crying in earnest.

Hours later when the teen was long asleep, Elizabeta sat wide awake on her laptop, researching every way she could bring someone back from a dissociated state.

Roderich visited on the third day, although Feliciano was still at school when he arrived. He sat sipping tea at the kitchen table, fingers tapping an upbeat little melody as he listened to Elizabeta vent all her frustrations.

“I just don’t know what to do with him. I think he trusts me, but I’m afraid he doesn’t believe me when I say he’s getting better.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And he hardly eats anything, the poor dear. He’s just skin and bones, and I don’t know why nobody thought to do something about it sooner.”

“Is that so?”

“I just feel so awful for him, he hardly ever smiles anymore.”

Roderich hummed in acknowledgement, still sipping contentedly at the hot tea he’d been served. He looked up when he felt Elizabeta’s smoldering gaze, shrinking back when she continued to stare at him expectantly, “Well, what do you want me to do about it?”

Elizabeta sighed loudly in exasperation, “You could try and pay attention at the very least.”

“I have been, if you haven’t noticed.” he grumbled. “Teenagers are always difficult, just let him figure things out on his own.”

“But that’s the problem, he *has* been on his own.” Elizabeta groaned, her own finger tapping in no particular rhythm on the table. “You knew him before all this started, I thought you could help.”

Roderich cringed at the beat she was tapping, setting down his cup of tea a little harsher than what was necessary, “Yes, a rather presumptuous assumption on your end.”

Elizabeta pouted, “Don’t you feel bad at all? He’s just a kid, you know.”

With a drawn out sigh, Roderich reached down and dug something out of his pocket. Without a word, he set something in the middle of the table with a dull *clack.*

It looked like some kind of cube, a mismatched collection of colors on every side. Elizabeta picked it up curiously, turning her gaze upwards in confusion, “A rubik’s cube? I didn’t think you were the type to like these kinds of puzzles.”

“Well I didn’t buy it for me.” Roderich mumbled, picking up his tea to take a long drink. He put it down when it was empty, refusing to make eye contact when he said, “You said he wouldn't stop fidgeting, right? Well, then he'll need something to do with his hands.”

Suddenly realizing what was going on, Elizabeta fidgeted with the cube, finding that it did indeed keep her hands busy. She looked back up with a bright smile, “What a wonderful idea! Yes, I think this will be perfect.”

Roderich went red, that finger beginning to tap out some abrupt melody as he said, “Don’t read too far into this. Irritating teens today just don’t know how to sit still.”

Elizabeta laughed at the weak excuse, standing to walk over to the sputtering man. She bent down and planted a kiss on his cheek, “This is very sweet of you, thank you.”

If possible, his face went even more red, “Like I said, don’t read into this. Besides, from the sounds of things, he needs more than just a puzzle.”

Elizabeta nodded, smirking at the dark blush that went down his neck, “He’s going straight to the doctor after school tomorrow. Hopefully we can get him some help.”

“Very good.” Roderich huffed, bringing the cup of tea to his lips only to realize it was empty. He glared at it, holding it out for Elizabeta to take.

She swiped the cup from him, “One of these days you’ll have to make your own tea.”

“Mm-hm.”

“Honestly, I’m not your maid, you know.”

“Is that so?”

“And another thing…”

Day number four was different.

They had gone to the doctor's office earlier that day, and the results were concerning to say the least.

Actually, Elizabeta was positively fuming even if the way she sat hunched over the kitchen table didn't betray her growing ire. She stared down at a stack of papers below her, making a conscious effort not to jump in her car and commit felony assault. There were just so many things that plagued the poor teen who was taking refuge in her home.

Really, it was just a simple checkup. She'd taken Feliciano into the doctor — *something that should have been done much sooner* — to check the burn on his wrist, but the man had taken one look at the teen and launched into a long series of rather invasive questions. While they would have to do a follow-up with a specialist, the doctor had made some diagnoses that made Elizabeta's stomach turn.

The most obvious issue was some sort of anxiety disorder — something that she'd expected, quite honestly. On top of that, Feliciano had explained that he had a history with panic attacks as well. The preliminary checkup wasn't conclusive whether or not they happened in isolation or were the result of some sort of panic disorder, but either way it was cause for concern.

However, the anxiety wasn't what had Elizabeta silently seething alone in the kitchen in the dead of night. No, it was the litany of other mental health issues that had *never* been addressed.

It was likely he was suffering from some level of depression, and there were also suspicions of a possible eating disorder given just how malnourished he was (and had been for some time, apparently). The sudden stutter he'd developed was also concerning. She'd always wondered about the stutter, the way he would stumble clumsily around his words. Somehow finding out that it may be the result of severe emotional trauma not nearly as surprising as it should have been.

Elizabeta clenched her fists, half of her wanting to lash out and the other half wanting to hide Feliciano away forever so he couldn't be hurt anymore. She knew that he'd been suffering with at least some of these afflictions for a while, and Lovino had been so bold as to warn her about the panic attacks and anxiety. That's really what made her angry, the fact that both Lovino *and* Antonio were aware of these things and had done little more than watch him deteriorate further.

She scoffed to herself, trying not to let irritation cloud her thoughts. Elizabeta wasn't angry at Lovino per se — after all, he was just as much a kid as Feliciano. Ignorance as to how he should react to his younger brother's worsening condition would be Lovino's excuse, and Elizabeta supposed she could grant him that.

But it never should have gotten this bad.

Elizabeta sighed, some of the tension leaving her body as she slumped back in her seat. The blame didn't rest solely on Lovino — no, almost all of it was the fault of that vile, wicked

man the brothers called a father. They had been left to flounder in a cruel world, and it distressed and saddened Elizabeta greatly to realize that Feliciano had been pulled into the middle of some harsh tug-of-war where he was the prize to be won.

She stared listlessly ahead, once again having to suppress the murderous thoughts in her head. Lost in thought as she was, she didn't hear someone shuffle quietly into the kitchen.

"Uh, Miss Elizabeta?" whispered a nervous voice.

She jumped in surprise, but masked her earlier rage with a smile as she turned to face the object of her silent musings, "Feli, dear. What do you need?

Feliciano was fidgeting loosely with his hands, sparing a fleeting glance to the small stack of papers on the table before mumbling, "I-I don't mean to be a bother, but…"

"Nonsense!" Elizabeta said brightly. She approached the teen carefully, taking his hands into her own to end the incessant fidgeting, "You could never be a bother to me. What is it you need?"

"I-I'm really sorry, b-but I can't sleep because I had this dream, and… and I just-" Feliciano stuttered, tears pooling in the corners of his eyes as his face burned in embarrassment.

Elizabeta shushed him as she glanced at the clock, realizing for the first time how late it was. She hadn't even noticed, too engrossed in her own rage and fantasies of murder to keep track of the time. She turned back to the clearly distraught teen, squeezing his hands as she said softly, "I'm sorry, honey. Do you want to talk about it?"

He shrugged, sparing yet another glance to the documents piled neatly on the table. He extracted one of his hands from the loose grip, sniffling softly as he rubbed away the tears in his eyes, but otherwise held his silence.

Elizabeta waited patiently, giving Feliciano enough time to organize his thoughts. She'd been making a conscious effort not to push too hard when it was clear he was overwhelmed, but sometimes it was best to be direct with him, "I'm not going to make you talk, but I think it might help."

Nodding in apparent agreement, Feliciano did his best to maintain eye contact as he whispered, "I-it was really dumb, b-but I had a dream that… um…" He scrubbed violently at his eyes again, clearly trying to get a hold of himself. "I had a dream a-about *Nonno's* funeral."

Elizabeta tightened her grip around the one hand she still had a grip on, "That's not dumb at all, Feli. He was a very special man to you, and-"

"But it wasn't just *Nonno."* Feliciano cut her off, his bottom lip trembling as he continued. "I-I saw my mom — she was dead too. And then so was Toni, and then… then I-I saw…" he brought in a shuddering breath, clapping a hand over his eyes to try and stop the tears from falling, "Lovi. I saw Lovi."

He sounded so heartbroken, like the events he'd described had actually happened and weren't just some awful nightmare. Elizabeta felt a fierce wave of protectiveness punch her in the chest, and it was with an uneven breath of her own that she whispered, "I'm so sorry."

Feliciano nodded his appreciation, hand still pushed over his eyes as he mumbled, "A-and I know it wasn't real, b-but my stupid brain won't stop making me feel bad, and I'm just so *tired."*

Elizabeta reached up and gently removed the hand the teen was using to obscure his eyes from view. She was met by watery hazel orbs, both red-rimmed as he struggled to hold onto coherency. She smiled softly at how brightly those eyes seemed to shine despite all the pain he'd been through, "Please keep your head up, dear."

He squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to do as she directed, "I wish you w-would stop saying that."

"And why's that?" Elizabeta said lightly, still trying to catch those elusive eyes.

"Because I-I might cry again." he mumbled softly.

Elizabeta nodded in understanding, "It's okay to cry, you know. You've been through a lot."

With a shrug, Feliciano swiped at his eyes once again, "Why does all th-this stuff k-keep happening to me?"

It was an unfair question, one which Elizabeta had no idea how to answer. There was no rationale behind the terrible misfortunes that had befallen the small teen that stood before her, there was no justification for the painful life he's led. His eyes bore into her, searching for the answer, and all Elizabeta could say was, "This never should have happened — any of it. You deserve so much better."

"But *why?"* Feliciano begged, eyes shining with unshed tears. "Why did it happen?"

"I really don't know, sweetie. I wish I had answers for you." Elizabeta whispered, finding it hard to move under the intensity of that watery gaze.

Feliciano shook his head, apparently dissatisfied with the response, "I-I just feel so *used,* and I want to get better, b-but what if I don't?"

"You are getting better, though." Elizabeta said with a soft smile, beginning the task of guiding the teen by the shoulder to the living room.

Feliciano followed her to the couch, allowing himself to be pushed gently onto the soft cushions there, "But how do you know? I-I can't even talk right, and I have all these horrible s-scars, and it still hurts, and I don't know if I c-can even smile anymore, and-"

"-and despite it all, you're still the strongest person I've ever met." Elizabeta finished firmly for him. "I know we haven't known each other for very long, but I can already tell just how brave you are."

“I-I mean, I wouldn’t go *that* far.” Feliciano breathed, biting nervously at his bottom lip.

“Well I just did.” Elizabeta said with a sharp nod, sitting down on the couch next to him. “We’re going to work on things, and you’ll be better before you know it. You’ll smile again, and I can’t wait to be there to see it.”

The bold words were met by silence, Feliciano having been rendered speechless. He fidgeted loosely with his hands, his face impossibly conflicted.

Elizabeta sighed when she noticed him shutting down, his face going blank in thought. Maybe her words had been too bold, or maybe the teen just wasn’t willing to believe them yet. Recovery felt nearly impossible, but Elizabeta was determined to at least begin the process with him. Distantly she wished she was allowed more time to work through his issues with him, but they only had a little over a week until everything would finally explode in court.

The silence persisted, and Elizabeta was getting lost to her own thoughts once again. So, when a finger tapped her gently on the shoulder, she nearly jumped in surprise. She turned, an apology on the tip of her tongue, but the words died when her eyes met soft amber.

Feliciano was smiling shakily up at her. The expression was tinged with a careful type of hope, and more than anything, *trust.* He cleared his throat, eyes no longer shimmering with tears as he whispered, “Do you really think I’ll get better?”

She nodded, a small smile of her own in place when Elizabeta felt how genuine the question was, “Of course I do.”

He closed his eyes, exhaustion finally catching up with him as he leaned heavily into the arm of the sofa. Feliciano fought to keep the smile in place, and he even managed a breathy laugh as he said, “Please don’t say things like that.”

“Now, why would I do that?” Elizabeta giggled.

Feliciano’s body relaxed further, his voice no longer so pained when he whispered, “Because I might believe you.”

Day number four was different. It was finally a step in the right direction.

Chapter End Notes

Heyyyy, I'm back! This took longer than expected, but hopefully the wait was worth it! We're entering the final arc of the story, and I had to outline everything out!

Anywho, I really hoped you liked the chapter! It's a bit different than some of the others, but I hope the montage-like format wasn't choppy or anything.

Let me know what you think! We may finally get this child some help. Once again: Elizabeta. is. best. girl.

Lol, thanks so much for reading, love you all.

'Till next time!

Chapter 55

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino couldn't tell if he wanted to scream out in all-consuming rage or break down into a pitiful sobbing mess. Maybe both, maybe neither, he just didn't know. His chest felt unbearably tight, his hands shook, and his eyes stung. Everything in him begged to lash out, to shout all his grievances to the sky, to do *something,* but he was hopelessly frozen.

He was curled up in the corner of the couch, arms crushing his knees to his chest, staring blankly down at his own cell phone. The little device sat innocuously on the small coffee table in front of the couch, its diminutive figure betraying nothing of the sickening nature of the video he had just borne witness to.

Oh, how he wanted to smash that device to pieces.

It wasn't the poor phone's fault what horrific content was contained in its memory, but Lovino wanted to destroy it nonetheless. Maybe then he could purge what he just witnessed from his mind, expunge these conflicting emotions that threatened to consume him.

He'd watched the video without pause, too frozen to do anything but stare in barely-concealed distress. It's not like the camera had captured much beyond the rustling of his brother's pocket, but he could hear every word, every *poisonous* word uttered from his father's mouth during the brief encounter.

It was disgusting, the short conversation ending with his brother being quite literally thrown out of the house to suffer alone in the cold *all night.* While Lovino himself had suffered the same fate a time or two when he was younger, it didn't make seeing his little brother suffer so terribly any easier to witness.

Lovino pushed his hands into his eyes, a shuddering breath shaking his entire frame as he contemplated what he should do next. The comments Cristiano had said about pinning the abuse on their grandfather had stolen the breath from his lungs. While it was true that Roma was a habitual smoker, he had stopped the instant he uncovered the nature of abuse his grandson's had been living through.

What was worse yet was the excuse Cristiano planned on using about the fresh burn on his brother's wrist. Apparently he was going to try and coerce Feliciano into admitting that he'd put the mark there himself. It was nauseating to think that his plan could have worked — his brother was mentally compromised in more ways than one, and had he not taken this video then Lovino had no doubt that the man could have convinced the court of this horrifying lie.

He'd already sent the video to Tino and he prayed that this overwhelming piece of evidence was enough to put a definitive end to things. They would go before a judge in five days, and the question now wasn't if Feliciano would go back to their father (unless there was a breakthrough in the case, that man was through), but if he'd be returned to Lovino's care.

With another shaky breath, Lovino shifted on the couch until he was laying more comfortably on his side. Antonio was due back from work any time, and he mentally urged him to return faster. Lovino needed him now, and especially after he had to sit through that awful video.

He was afraid, perhaps for the first time since his grandfather's death, that he really wasn't the best fit to raise his brother. Nevermind the fact that he was only nineteen, Lovino himself had his fair share of personal issues that he needed to work out. One of the prerequisites to be considered for guardianship was the ability to provide emotionally, something he had clearly failed at. Beyond that, Gilbert had expressed his concerns about Antonio and the fact that their relationship may hinder their attempts to gain full custody depending on the judge.

"Fucking bullshit." Lovino growled under his breath.

Tino also had his fair share of concerns, again pointing out the problems it posed to place an emotionally unstable teenager in the care of two people who could hardly support themselves. They were too young, too damaged to support someone who needed so much more than they could give.

The creaking sound of the door is what broke Lovino out of his dismal musings, although he didn't look up when Antonio padded softly up to him.

He kneeled on the ground, placing a gentle hand on top of Lovino's head as he whispered, "Are you alright?"

Lovino closed his eyes, shaking his head softly as he worked up the courage to admit that he really wasn't okay. Even though they had won in putting Cristiano in jail (and hopefully he would stay there), it didn't feel like a victory. His brother still had to live with the trauma left in the wake of his own cowardice, and Lovino may not even get the chance to rectify that mistake. The fight was no longer against that abusive bastard he called a father, but against the system itself— a fight that may prove to be much more difficult.

Antonio must have gotten worried with the lack of response because he started lightly shaking Lovino's shoulder, "Lovi? Are you okay?"

He sighed, finally peeling his eyes back open with some effort, "I'll be fine, stop worrying so much."

Disbelief shone clearly in Antonio's face, his eyes very briefly flitting to the phone that sat in front of the couch before saying, "You watched the video, didn't you?"

"Yup." Lovino admitted hollowly, nearly flinching when the hand on his head moved to cup his cheek.

"You should have waited for me." Antonio reprimanded softly, although he didn't seem all that surprised.

Lovino shrugged halfheartedly, too wrung out to feel any real remorse. He'd told Antonio that they'd review the video together, but being home alone all day had completely broken

his resolve. Lovino *had* to know what happened, and although he'd known how awful the video would be, it didn't make reviewing it any easier.

Antonio sighed, but nonetheless prodded Lovino into moving over so he could lay on the couch next to him. It was a tight fit, but that was to be expected. They both turned on their sides so they were lying chest to chest, their legs tangling loosely together as Lovino immediately tucked his head under his boyfriend's chin.

Without any hesitation, Antonio wrapped a comforting arm around him and whispered, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Lovino nodded against his chest, for once feeling no need to bury his fear, "Do you really think I'm a terrible excuse for a brother?"

Antonio choked on his own breath, arm unconsciously tightening around the smaller, "Of course not, why-"

"You said that if I abandoned Feli, then I was a terrible excuse for a brother." Lovino breathed, recounting the words that still haunted him. "Well, I abandoned him, and now he has to live with it for the rest of his life."

There was an audible gulp, but Lovino couldn't see what expression was on his boyfriend's face since he still had his head pushed under his chin. Despite this, Lovino kept his expression carefully neutral as he waited for a response.

It took a few seconds of stunned silence, but Antonio did eventually say unevenly, "I'm so sorry, Lovi. I never thought you were a terrible brother, and I still don't. I just wanted to snap you out of your depression, not hurt you."

Lovino nodded slowly, considering the words. He believed Antonio in that he wasn't trying to inflict pain with his words, but that didn't mean that they weren't true. Especially now, when he didn't have to rely on his imagination to know what his brother had been living through, he felt as though he'd failed at every point. It stung, and with another shuddering breath he said, "Elizabeta texted me yesterday."

"Is it about Feli?" Antonio asked softly.

Lovino hummed his assent, "She took him to the doctor." He closed his eyes, feeling a dull pain thrum harshly in his stomach. He twisted his hands into the front of Antonio's shirt, unable to mask the tremor in his voice when he whispered, "Why didn't we ever do that?"

Antonio stopped breathing for a few seconds, his grip once again tightening imperceptibly. He seemed to be at a complete loss, but managed to grit out, "I wanted to, but I was afraid."

What he was afraid of was left unsaid, but Lovino knew full well why they'd been hesitant. It was clear that his brother had some deep-seated issues, but if they sought out professional help for him then the chances that they would have been awarded custody would've been severely reduced. Looking back Lovino realized how selfish it had been, so it was with a pained gasp that he whispered, "Do you think we should have?"

He may not have been consciously aware of it, but Antonio had started nodding before the question was even voiced. It was like he knew what they did was selfish, his voice also shaky now, “Yeah, I think we should have.”

Lovino sniffled, but kept his tears at bay, “He’s depressed, you know.”

“Yeah.” Antonio breathed.

“He stutters, too. They can’t figure out why.”

“Yeah.”

“He doesn’t eat either.” Lovino sniffled again, his voice slowly raising in pitch. “I knew he didn’t eat, but I never-“ he choked up before he could finish, although he still wasn’t crying. Not yet, at least.

Antonio shushed him, dragging a slow hand up and down his back. He was clearly doing his best to appear normal, but Lovino could hear the rapid thump in his chest.

“We messed up, Toni.” he whispered.

“I know.” was the subdued response.

Lovino still had his hands twisted in the fabric of Antonio’s shirt, his grip tightening as he tried to get a hold of his breathing. They hadn’t put Feliciano’s wellbeing in the forefront of their minds, instead worrying about a court case that had been months away. They got too caught up in the moment, letting him slip away entirely before they could recover the situation. To add insult to injury, Lovino had allowed it to happen. He gave up despite every other person telling him not to, and now he had the audacity to feel sorry for himself.

“Lovi, you need to breathe.” Antonio reminded gently.

Lovino deflated as he exhaled, not even realizing that he’d been holding his breath. He was still hidden away under Antonio’s chin, so it was doubtful he would notice how his face was twisted in mental anguish, or the way that his eyes were painfully red-rimmed. However, the way he started threading a gentle hand through his hair indicated that he didn’t need to see his face to know that Lovino was painfully close to another break down.

“It was awful.” Lovino mumbled, miraculously able to stave off an emotional outburst.

“The video?” Antonio clarified.

“Yeah.” he muttered, an angry edge to his voice. “It was fucking disgusting. If I see that son of a bitch again, only one of us is walking away.”

The words were cold, fire no longer alight in his chest, but ice. He couldn’t find it in himself to feel explosive anger anymore, but he could sure as hell feel cold fury.

Antonio shivered, “Can it wait until after the hearing?”

Lovino laughed wryly, nodding once. He wondered if he even had a chance anymore — it certainly didn't feel like it. He was terrified of his brother being placed in a foster home (both he and Antonio had heard horror stories about those places), but more than anything they just wanted to be able to see him again. Apparently Elizabeta had made more progress with him in a week than both he and Antonio had in months.

He frowned, again wondering if he really was the best fit to raise his brother. On the one hand, Feliciano was sixteen — only two years away from making decisions on his own. He wouldn't be subject to this awful game of back and forth anymore, so maybe being placed in the custody of the state really would be a mercy.

Then again, he was *sixteen,* in the grand scheme still just a child. These years were formative in his life, and it was important now more than ever that he had a stable place to live. They'd both been deprived of security and peace for their entire lives (bar a blissful four years with their grandfather), but Lovino thought that he at least owed him two years of stability.

In a split second he made a decision: for the first time in his life, Lovino would willingly surrender control.

He abruptly sat up, nearly sending Antonio crashing to the ground in his haste. Lovino's eyes were wide with determination, pushing away the treacherous voice in his head that begged him to hold on, to not follow through on this decision.

Antonio watched in astonishment when Lovino snatched his phone off the coffee table, finally breaking out of his shock long enough to ask, "Is everything okay?"

"I hope so." Lovino grumbled under his breath, shaky hands fumbling clumsily with his phone.

The shock was wearing off, and it wasn't long before Antonio was sitting up as well. He peered over Lovino's shoulder curiously, "What are you doing?"

One last wave of uncertainty hit him squarely in the chest before Lovino breathed, "The first responsible thing I've done since Roma died."

At least, he hoped it was.

Chapter End Notes

omg I finally have wifi... yeah, so my internet has been in and out lately (I promise I've been writing and stuff lol)

Anywho, I hoped you liked it! I know it's a bit shorter than normal, but I'm gonna make up for it in the next chapter (I already have it planned out, I just have to type it up :D)

Thank y'all so much for reading this far and stuff, it means a ton. Like you guys have been so kind and wonderful in the comments, and I absolutely adore talking to all of you. Thank you so much for making this story a joy to write, I love you guys so much <3

Okay, mushy stuff over!

'Till next time!

Chapter 56

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Six colors, that was it. Just. Six. Colors. There were only so many combinations, but Feliciano was dismayed to find that he had yet to discover the correct one that would finally, *finally,* put those six colors in order.

He was given this particular puzzle from Elizabeta (well, apparently it was from Roderich, but she was the one to deliver it to him) and had instructed him to fidget with the cube instead of his hands whenever he felt anxious. He was a tad apprehensive at first, but had quickly fallen into the habit of doing exactly that.

Now, if only he could figure the damn thing out.

Feliciano stuck his tongue out in concentration, his hands twisting and turning as he tried to solve the puzzle. So far it was proving to be a fruitless endeavor, and it was really starting to get on his nerves.

He was currently curled up in the corner of the couch, a look of careful concentration etched into his face as his hands twisted and turned. Ludwig was still out, and distantly he thought he could hear Gilbert's bored voice as he spoke to somebody on the phone.

Elizabeta had to work, although she'd cut her hours to accommodate him lately — something he had felt guilty about, but she was quick to dash those feelings before they became dangerous. Instead of leaving him to his own devices, she had promptly dropped Feliciano off at the Beilschmidt residence so he *wouldn't get bored.*

He very nearly rolled his eyes at the thought. He knew full well that she (or anyone) didn't trust him to be home alone, and he supposed that he really couldn't blame her. Elizabeta was originally going to drop him off at his brother's, but apparently Lovino was busy preparing for the court case.

Feliciano hummed in victory when a decent block of the colors lined up neatly on one side, finding that he was rather enjoying this little challenge all things considered. It distracted him, but not to the point where he checked out behind a wall of dangerous thoughts and emotions. Instead of working himself up into a panic over something inconsequential (something that tended to happen when he was left alone in silence), he found that just having something in his hands to manipulate did wonders for his mental health. It passed the time, even if he *couldn't figure this stupid thing out!*

With a huff of annoyance, Feliciano glared down at the puzzle in his hands as he hit another snag. He started twisting the cube anew, so lost in those six colors that he didn't hear the door creak open, or the sudden pitter-patter of rapid footsteps charging across the room getting closer and closer and-

“Wow, what’s that?”

Feliciano shrieked in alarm, clapping a hand over his mouth before the sound could turn into a full-on scream. His heart pounded painfully in his ribcage, his eyes snapping down to see who had so abruptly shocked him out of his restless fidgeting.

Surprisingly, it was a boy. He was staring Feliciano down with shimmering blue eyes, bright as a clear summer’s sky and just as warm. His fair hair and pale skin did nothing to detract from the overall warmth and gentle innocence his appearance projected, although he did possess a certain edge around him. Skittish seemed like the wrong word, but Feliciano couldn’t think of a better description. Maybe jumpy… or nervous?

The boy shifted, perhaps a little apprehensive with the lack of response. That smile seemed a little less radiant than before as he mumbled a soft, “Oh, I was being a bother again, wasn’t I?”

Sensitive.

Feliciano allowed himself a soft smile, satisfied that he’d found the correct descriptor. He uncurled himself from the corner of the couch, holding the cube out as he said in a carefully hushed voice, “Um, do you mean this?”

The boy’s face lit up with all the brilliance of the rising sun when he was offered the colorful puzzle, and Feliciano was pleased to note that he didn’t alter the pattern at all. It was gentle the way he handled it, his fascination with such a simple toy a bit odd, yet endearing nonetheless.

Finally, after thoroughly examining the colorful puzzle, the boy returned it to its owner with a bright smile, “I think the colors are out of order.”

Feliciano couldn’t help the breathy laugh at the words, nodding his agreement, “I-I think so too.”

The boy opened his mouth, presumably to respond, but suddenly there was a new voice added in the mix:

“Peter, what did I say about running ahead of me?”

Both Peter and Feliciano whipped their heads up to the person standing in the doorway, a small man wearing a light scowl of disapproval. He had platinum blond hair, his short stature not impeding the air of cool confidence that surrounded him, but he didn’t come across as harsh. His words were sharp, but not piercing, his expression decidedly more exasperated than angry.

Peter’s shoulders shot to his ears, the boy biting his lip nervously before he answered, “You said I shouldn’t be doing that.”

The man relaxed at the sudden shift of demeanor, replacing the stern expression with something a bit more fond, “So you won’t do it again, right?”

“I suppose not.” he mumbled.

The man sighed, but Feliciano couldn’t feel any annoyance behind it. It was like he was used to Peter’s excitable nature, the reprimand said with such familiarity that it had to have been commonplace. His eyes swiveled to the only other inhabitant of the small room, eyes lighting up in recognition, “Oh, you must be Feliciano!”

Feliciano jumped at being addressed so suddenly, his shoulders creeping up imperceptibly when the man stopped in front of him. He wasn’t close enough to be a threat, but he was standing close enough for the teen to make out his beautifully strange opalescent eyes. He didn’t think they’d ever met, but his name was said with such confidence that Feliciano felt like he *should* know who this was, “Um, I-I’m sorry, have we met?”

“Nope!” the man intoned brightly, although he was cautious not to yell. “But I’ve wanted to for a while now.”

“Really?”

“Of course! My name’s Tino, and I’m your brother’s attorney” he chirped.

Feliciano nodded slowly, still just a bit confused. He itched to pick at the ends of his fingers, but he instead idly twisted a piece of the cube back and forth.

If Tino was phased by the lack of response, he didn’t show it. He simply stood where he was in the middle of the living room, making no move to approach the teen any closer.

Feliciano appreciated it, and he was finally able to break through his own nervousness long enough to ask, “How d-did you recognize me?”

“Oh, you look far too much like your brother to be anyone else.” Tino laughed, placing his hands on either side of Peter’s shoulders when the young boy padded softly over to him. “I’m sorry, this must seem like a bit of a shock.”

Feliciano shrugged, unable to feel overly surprised by anything anymore. His life was an ongoing soap opera that became increasingly dramatic every day, so he was quick to accept this new bit of information with ease.

Peter bounced lightly where he stood, looking back and forth between the two as he tried to contain all his pent-up energy. But his attention was suddenly stolen away, his face lighting up in a way that only a child’s could. He bolted away from Tino, charging across the room with the excited cry of, “Gil!”

The albino in question was standing at the end of the hallway, a mischievous smirk worming its way onto his face when he saw Peter tearing across the room to meet him. When the boy got close enough, Gilbert hooked an arm around his waist and spun them in a tight circle. Peter was giggling in delight, smiling up at him when he was finally set down.

Gilbert grinned right back, ruffling the boy's hair kindly, “How ya doing, kiddo?”

“I’m super today!” Peter all but sang.

Gilbert held out a hand for a high-five, laughing when it was enthusiastically returned, “Glad to hear it, dude.”

Tino watched everything with a soft smile, but he reluctantly snapped himself out of it in favor of handing Gilbert what was presumably Peter’s jacket, “I’ll be back in a few hours, thanks for doing this on such short notice.”

Gilbert smiled, “No problem, I totally get it.”

With a short nod, Tino turned his attention back to Feliciano. He approached the teen cautiously, every move slow and measured. He held out a hand, smiling lightly when it was accepted, “It was very nice to meet you. I apologize that this meeting was so brief, but we’ll have some more time to talk in a day or two.”

Feliciano nodded, gently shaking hands with him. He was just a tad annoyed (and begrudgingly appreciative) that this man acted so cautious around him. He didn’t want to be treated like he was fragile, but in reality he kind of was breakable — something that he resented about himself.

Tino backed off with a smile, hugging tightly back when Peter all but launched himself into him. After the brief hug, he turned sharply on his heel and flew out of the apartment. He seemed to be in a rush, but was mindful to close the door softly behind him.

The moment Tino scurried away, Gilbert turned to Feliciano with an apologetic smile, “I have to wrap things up for work, would you mind keeping an eye on Peter for a little while?”

“Sure.” Feliciano shrugged, feeling more than seeing the way the couch dipped when Peter jumped onto the cushion next to him.

Gilbert nodded with a relieved little smile, “Thanks, dude. I’ll be done in a few minutes.”

He sped down the hallway, apparently in a rush as well. Feliciano was curious about all the sudden activity, the way that everyone was constantly running around lately, but he pushed it to the back of his mind. He turned to peer at Peter, jumping just the slightest bit to see the boy’s gaze fixed on him.

Peter looked perplexed, staring at the one place Feliciano wished he wouldn’t. The teen’s shoulders began scrunching up defensively when the staring persisted until Peter couldn’t contain his question anymore, “What’s wrong with your arm?”

Feliciano’s breath caught in his throat, unconsciously bringing a hand up to cover the bandage on his wrist. The burn itself no longer stung with such intensity, nor were those bubbled blisters still present. His wrist was still discolored where the burn had been, the bandage no longer serving much purpose beyond hiding the mark from view. He averted his eyes from that piercing stare, unable to help the stutter when he mumbled, “Oh, I-I just got a little hurt, but I’m okay.”

Peter nodded with an untroubled smile, “I got hurt too, see?” He hiked up one of his sleeves, revealing a small scar on the underside of his arm. It was a colorless line that ran up from his

elbow to the center of his arm, slightly jagged in some places. It couldn't be longer than four or so inches, but despite that the mark looked far too intentional to be considered some sort of accident.

"I'm sorry." Feliciano whispered sincerely, familiar with marks like those. His stomach rolled at the thought of this boy going through anything even remotely similar to what he'd experienced.

"That's quite alright!" Peter nearly yelled, releasing his sleeve to once again hide the scar there. "I've got new parents now, and I like them a lot better."

Feliciano allowed the smallest of smiles to break free, finding Peter's childlike enthusiasm refreshing, "Oh, well that's good."

"It's super good!" Peter laughed, flopping back on the couch even closer to the teen still curled up in the corner. "They're like really super nice, and they don't yell at me or anything!"

"Have you been there long?" Feliciano breathed, idly twisting that cube once more.

"Nope!" Peter chirped. "I've only been there for a few months."

Feliciano nodded, "I'm glad you found somewhere nice to live."

Peter laughed, obviously agreeing. He watched the teen twist the cube, asking excitedly, "Do you live somewhere nice, too?"

Feliciano froze in his incessant fidgeting, realizing that he really was in a nice place. Elizabeta has been nothing but supportive, the absolute picture of patience and grace. She never pushed too hard, but was willing to dig far enough to tackle whatever issue was bothering him. He smiled softly, meeting Peter's eyes when he answered, "I-I didn't always, but I think I'm in a good place now."

Peter patted him on the shoulder with a sympathetic smile, "I didn't always live in a very nice place either, but Gil took me away from there. Is that why you're here, too?"

"Uh, I guess… I-I mean, Gil helped a lot, but I'm actually waiting for his brother." Feliciano mumbled, once again wondering when Ludwig was going to return.

"Really? Why?" Peter asked curiously.

Feliciano blushed, "Oh, no reason."

Peter put his hands on his hips with an indignant pout, "It's not very nice to lie."

With a breathy laugh, Feliciano nodded in agreement, "You're right, it's not. Ludwig's my friend, and I was just here to visit."

"Well, why didn't you just say that!" Peter shouted in annoyance.

Feliciano smiled softly, shrugging as he said, “You’ll understand when you’re older.”

Peter scowled, crossing his arms petulantly over his chest, “Everybody always says that to me.”

“Sorry.” Feliciano said with a smirk, although he didn’t feel in the least bit guilty. Peter really was a breath of fresh air, his unabashed manner of speaking and prodding not feeling invasive in the same way that other people tried to speak to him. He was just a genuinely curious kid, and even with the subtle hints the boy dropped about his home life in the past, Peter didn’t seem particularly ashamed or held back by it — hell, he had very blatantly shown off the scar on his arm.

Feliciano thought he could stand to learn something from this kid, even if he knew he’d never be quite so bold. Still, it was nice to share an open conversation with no double-meaning, so Feliciano relaxed and mindlessly chatted with the young boy until Ludwig finally returned home.

The blond walked in carrying at least three bags of groceries on either arm and a gallon of milk in one of his hands. He turned his attention to the living room, his lips quirking up when he saw Feliciano still curled up on the couch.

Peter instantly stood, charging across to meet Ludwig in the kitchen, “Here, I can help!” He took the gallon of milk from the blond’s hand, chest puffed out proudly when he dutifully placed it in the refrigerator.

Ludwig looked mildly surprised at the sudden appearance of a young boy, but offered a soft smile nevertheless, “Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome!” Peter yelled enthusiastically.

Feliciano giggled at the characteristic shouting, leaving those six (unordered) colors on the couch as he moved to help Ludwig as well, “Took you long enough.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes, handing off a bag of groceries as he mumbled, “And I suppose you would have been faster, right?”

“I would have been super fast!” Peter yelled, inserting himself between the two.

Feliciano huffed in amusement, beginning the task of returning some of the groceries to their designated shelves.

“Have you eaten anything, yet?” Ludwig asked lightly.

Feliciano froze in his actions, his hand hovering in the air where he was about to reach up to one of the higher shelves. Shaking himself out of it, he placed the can on the shelf, and without turning around he answered, “No, but I-I’m not hungry.”

The way he hesitated exposed him, and Ludwig didn’t miss it. With a sigh, the blond walked over and placed a bag of chips on the counter. The unvoiced instruction was there, clear as day, and Feliciano squirmed where he stood as he tried to decide whether to acquiesce or not.

Elizabeta has been trying to dig up the reason behind his refusal to eat, agreeing with the doctor with the theory that it stemmed from a lack of control.

Feliciano sighed, wondering if that was true. His whole life had been at the mercy of other people and what they wanted, so maybe this was the one thing he could do that would alleviate some of the ever-present guilt he felt without getting in the way. When his family had been struggling to keep up with their rent, he'd started skipping meals as a way to ease the financial burden. It soon became a habit, and the habit had turned into a necessity when his body started rejecting food altogether.

Maybe something really is wrong with me.

Despite Elizabeta's fierce words on the contrary, Feliciano couldn't help but feel a sense of hopelessness creep in whenever he was reminded of his pitiful state. He stared down at the bag of chips, wondering if he'd ever be able to enjoy such a simple snack again.

Something in his face must have worried Ludwig, because he was suddenly shuffling quietly over, "I'm sorry, was that too pushy?"

Feliciano sniffled, swiping at his eyes with the back of his hand. His mood was constantly shifting these days, such innocuous things like a bag of chips enough to set him off. He brought in a deep breath and nodded, "Um, I-I just got overwhelmed again."

Ludwig nodded slowly, but before he could respond, a small body suddenly shot out in front of him.

Feliciano squeaked in surprise when he felt somebody crash into him, arms squeezing tightly around his waist. He peered down curiously, trying to ignore his own rapid heartbeat, and was only mildly shocked to find a pair of bright baby blues staring up at him.

"You looked awfully sad, and hugs always make me feel better when I feel sad." Peter said by way of explanation.

His head came up to the middle of Feliciano's chest, both of them decidedly small for their respective ages. Despite this, the hug warmed his whole body up, and it was with only one more moment of hesitation that Feliciano hugged him back, "Thanks."

Somebody was chuckling from a little ways off, and all three members of the kitchen turned to find a grinning albino trying to contain himself, *"Aww,* you're too cute Peter!"

Peter pouted, pulling away from the hug with his hands on his hips, "I'm not cute!"

Gilbert tried to nod seriously, but his smirk gave him away, "Oh, that's right, you're too cool for that."

"You bet I am!" Peter shouted, puffing his chest out to try and seem bigger.

Feliciano giggled into his hand at the display, the atmosphere in the kitchen lighthearted once again.

“So,” Gilbert said, bending down to pick something up off the ground. “I was thinking we could go to the park and play a game or two.”

He suddenly stood, a soccer ball held in one of his hands. He wore a wicked smile, a competitive edge gleaming in his eyes. He began idly throwing the ball up and down, one hand propped up on his hip as he awaited a response.

Feliciano started to nod, “That sounds-“

“Nope.” Ludwig cut him off shortly, putting his head down to finish stowing the groceries away.

“Come on! What are you so afraid of?” Gilbert huffed.

Ludwig shot him a pointed glare, “You get too carried away, *bruder.”*

Gilbert rolled his eyes, leaning over to try his luck with the youngest member present, “You ever played football, Peter?”

“Only a bit at school, I wasn’t allowed to play many games before.” Peter said, eyeing the ball with curiosity.

With a nod, Gilbert turned to Feliciano, “I hear you’re pretty good, how about we play a match or two?”

Suddenly understanding where this was headed, Feliciano nodded and glanced at Ludwig from the corner of his eye, *“Sì,* but I-I think we’ll need another person.”

“Hmm, I believe you’re right.” Gilbert said contemplatively, turning his gaze back to Peter, “What do you think, Pete? It’s pretty hard to play with just three people.”

“Right, I think four would be much better!”

Ludwig kept his head resolutely down, but the combined intensity of three pointed stares directed at him tore a long-suffering sigh from his mouth. He looked up with a glare, “Fine, but I swear if you get too rough-“

“Yeah, yeah, don’t worry.” Gilbert grumbled, waving his hand in the air to dismiss his brother.

Feliciano smiled shakily, still finding the action difficult to carry out as he used to. He heard Gilbert begin to explain some of the rules to an excited Peter, but his gaze was fixed on the blond before him. He walked over slowly, slipping a hand through his arm just to feel the security that the contact brought, “I-I’ll eat something on the way over.”

Ludwig looked over in shock, his posture relaxing when those words registered. He smiled softly with a little nod, “Thank you.”

“C’mon, let’s go already!” Peter yelled excitedly, running over to grab Feliciano by the hand.

He allowed himself to be pulled by the young boy, giggling as he was all but ordered to throw his shoes on so they could finally leave.

It wasn't overly cold out that day, although Feliciano still shivered when he stepped foot outside. True to his word, he had grabbed the bag of chips that'd been offered to him earlier, mindlessly shoving the crisps in his mouth before he had time to overthink it.

Ludwig hovered close by, both of them watching in amusement as Peter and Gilbert chattered about anything and everything. With a little smirk, the blond leaned over and whispered, "Ten dollars says my brother will act like a bigger child than Peter if he loses the football game."

Feliciano had to muffle a little giggle, "Is he that bad?"

"There's a reason he gets along so well with kids." Ludwig said with a fond roll of his eyes, "Gil is a huge baby, especially when he loses."

"Hey, I heard that!" Gilbert shouted, glaring over his shoulder.

Once again, Feliciano had to muffle a giggle with one of his hands when Ludwig dismissed him with a shrug. He felt just a hint of competitiveness flow through him as he whispered back, "Ten dollars."

Ludwig smirked, holding his hand out with a sharp nod, "Deal."

They shook hands, Gilbert throwing a vexed glare over his shoulder at the two.

The park was slowly coming into view, the trees nearly bare and the grass tinged a dull brown. Despite this, the vast landscape was beautiful in a natural sort of way. It wasn't that the park was all that big, but the juxtaposition of the cool industrial city around them to the untouched landscape added a certain charm to the otherwise dead scenery.

"Oh, wow!" Peter gasped in excitement, reaching blindly out to grab the first hand he could find. It just so happened to be Ludwig's, the boy tugging harshly as he yelled, "C'mon, let's go!"

Ludwig didn't have much choice but to follow, shooting a helpless look over his shoulder as he was quite literally dragged towards the park.

Feliciano kept crunching on his chips, but smiled lightly in amusement. It was kind of cute to watch the bulky blond being quite forcefully led by a boy more than half his size.

There was a breathy chuckle to his side, and glanced over to see that Gilbert had fallen in step with him, "It seems Peter's in charge now."

Feliciano nodded, feeling rather inclined to agree. The boy just barreled into everything head-first, that childlike wonder still very much alight in his eyes. Distantly Feliciano wished he could feel so untethered, but it wasn't worth the time to hope for something that would never be.

“Are you ready?”

The sudden question surprised him, and Feliciano looked over with a mildly confused expression, “Ready?”

Gilbert nodded, “You’re going to court soon, I know you’re being interviewed tomorrow.” he said softly, clearly cautious with this topic. “I also know you’re going to testify, which is super brave. Are you ready for it?”

“Oh.” Feliciano breathed, running a finger over the cube in his pocket, “Well, Miss Elizabeth has b-been helping, but…” He paused, trying to properly word just what he was feeling.

Gilbert waited patiently, sparing a glance towards the park where Peter was now literally running circles around an exasperated Ludwig.

“Uh, I-I’m really nervous because I can’t talk well, and I-I’m scared that-“ he had to clear his throat, feeling fear so potently that it threatened to overtake him. “Uh, I’m r-really scared that I won’t be able to see Lovi anymore.”

Gilbert sucked in a sharp intake of breath, his brow furrowed in confusion as he turned to ask, “Wait, he hasn’t told you yet?”

Feliciano twisted his head to the side, “Told me what?”

“Hurry up, slowpokes!” Peter shouted, running closer just to stop in the middle of the street.

“Ah, damn.” Gilbert muttered under his breath, rushing forward to lead the oblivious boy out of harm’s way, “Peter, get out of the road!”

“Whoops!” Peter laughed, taking two steps backwards to stand safely on the sidewalk. “Sorry, mum says I shouldn’t be doing that either.”

Gilbert sighed, but smiled nonetheless, “It’s alright, just don’t scare me like that.”

Feliciano watched the scene unfold before him, but his mind was preoccupied by what Gilbert said before they were interrupted. He pulled out the cube, twisting it viciously in his hands as he tried not to overthink things. Feliciano didn’t know if he could take it if Lovino was once again hiding things from him, but just like always he had to wait and see which direction his life would be pulled next.

“Are you okay?”

For the second time in the last hour, Feliciano had to clap a hand over his mouth to muffle a yelp of surprise. His eyes swiveled up, alarmed to note that Ludwig had managed to sneak up on him. Slowly, he removed the hand from over his mouth and nodded, “I’m alright.”

Ludwig didn’t look convinced, but he was quick to let it go. Instead, he offered his arm, smiling when Feliciano immediately looped them together. They walked across the street silently, meeting the other two in the park proper.

Gilbert was already kicking the ball around, passing it back and forth with Peter. Both were already wearing wide grins, and Feliciano could feel something warm stir in his chest at the sight.

It was such an innocent scene, the bright laughter from Peter betraying nothing of the pain he'd alluded to just a short while ago. Feliciano's lips twitched upwards, some of his own insecurities leaving him for just a blessed moment. He supposed he could allow the world to melt away for just a little while, the park becoming the only thing to exist for the rest of the afternoon.

"Hey, stop being a cutesy couple already, we've got a game to play!" Gilbert yelled, kicking the ball over to them.

Feliciano giggled, kicking the ball back with a little nod. He untangled their arms, but before he could trot off he turned to Ludwig with a deathly serious expression, "You're not going to tackle me this time, right?"

He had said it so evenly, so seriously, that a brief look of surprise colored Ludwig's expression. He shook his head to expel the expression, a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he said, "I don't know, depends on if you can keep up after this."

"After wha-" Feliciano tried to say, but was cut off when a hand brushed his hair back and a pair of lips pressed softly to his forehead. He stood in shocked silence, completely frozen to the spot even after Ludwig pulled back red-faced.

He was suddenly smirking, jogging right past Feliciano and towards his brother. Gilbert was already cackling madly, and Peter had his nose scrunched up in distaste.

Feliciano was still suspended in the moment, his shoulders relaxing when it registered what just happened. Laughter bubbled up in his chest, a feeling he had grown unfamiliar with. He felt light, his shoulders hitching up wildly as his face broke out into a smile so broad that his eyes were forced closed. Ludwig had been trying to fluster him in his own awkwardly sweet way, the gesture reminding him of the time he had quite literally shut him up by kissing him on the lips.

Suddenly, he was laughing in embarrassingly loud fits of giggles and squeaks. Just the look on Ludwig's face when he pulled away — all red from embarrassment, but so self-satisfied — was enough to send him into another fit of boisterous laughter.

He was gripping his stomach now, but the laughter was slowly ebbing. He hadn't felt this airy in a long time, finally peering up to notice that he had three onlookers wearing various faces of bemusement. Feliciano wiped away a stray tear, slowly coming down from the momentary bliss to ask, "What?"

Ludwig was the first to break out of the stunned silence, shaking his head with a relieved little smile, "I haven't heard you laugh like that in weeks."

Feliciano beamed in response, laughing once more when Peter kicked the ball harshly his way with the loud shout of, "C'mon, let's play already!"

So they did, and Feliciano only pretended to pout when Ludwig walked away ten dollars richer.

Chapter End Notes

I told you I'd make it up to you for the short chapter!

Lol, hoped you liked the fluff because I decided that there hasn't been enough of it lately and I wanted things to be happy (for now, at least).

We're hitting the home stretch my dudes, and I'm gonna try to do my best to surprise you before it's all said and done :)

Anywho, hope you enjoyed it and lemme know what you think! Peter is a hecking joy, and I love him so much. Also, why aren't there more fics with Feli interacting with kids? I feel like he'd be so good with them (or maybe that's just me).

Okie, I'm outtie.

'Til next time!

Chapter 57

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Over the years, Elizabeta had come to discover many things about herself — things like how much she enjoyed knitting, or just how terrible she was at painting and drawing. She loved tea, but it couldn't be too sweet or else it was no good, and one of her favorite colors was a cheerful lavender. She also hated to be dismissed, or ignored, but more than anything Elizabeta *hated* to wait. That's not to say that she wasn't a patient person, but being left to wait alone in a dull little room with only a potted plant to keep her company was nearly enough to drive her over the edge.

With a little purse of the lips, Elizabeta cast her eyes around the drab waiting room, having nothing to do but… well, wait. A clock sat high up on the cream walls, the incessant *tick* swallowed by the coarse grey carpeting. A number of chairs were all lined up in a row, but she was the only person present. There were also a few paintings that depicted various landscapes along the wall — she had grown particularly fond of the one with horses on it.

Left with nothing to do as she was, Elizabeta couldn't help but let her mind wander. Feliciano was further down the hallway, bearing whatever questioning those uncaring suits bothered to ask him. She hoped that the questioning wouldn't be too much for the meek teen, she really didn't want any of their progress to be forgotten. In fact, he'd been a nervous wreck when he woke up that morning, hardly eating for the nausea he felt. He'd viciously twisted at that colorful cube (a habit that Elizabeta was beyond pleased that he picked up), and he stumbled over every word so terribly that he had given up speaking entirely.

With a heavy sigh, Elizabeta stood and began pacing to expel some of her nervous energy. Once again she hoped that the interview was going well, but she really had no idea what kind of questions they would be asking him — they don't tell people as a precaution against giving the child time to prepare beforehand. While she felt nervous for Feliciano's sake, she could honestly say that things have been getting better. Actually, the last few days had gone wonderfully, the small teen was beginning to remember his optimism, and he was even smiling again (however brief or shaky it was). His resilience was amazing, although they weren't quite in the clear yet.

A door suddenly creaked open and Elizabeta whipped around with a nervous smile, one that became much more genuine when she saw who was there. Feliciano stood with a shaky smile of his own, his eyes only slightly red-rimmed. A muffled voice said something that sounded like, "You're free to go," before the door was closed softly behind him.

Elizabeta instantly approached the fidgety teen, letting him make the decision to approach her. When he did (with no hesitation, she was delighted to note) she threw a gentle arm around his shoulders and asked in a cheerful voice, "How did it go?"

Feliciano shrugged, "Um, alright I think."

“Well, that’s not very helpful.” Elizabeta pouted, although she felt no real annoyance. She took a step forward, guiding the teen through the dull room and towards the door. “What did they have you do?”

With another shrug, Feliciano attempted to elaborate, “Uh, well they a-asked a lot of questions.”

Elizbeta nodded seriously, “Yes, I do believe that’s how interviews work.”

Feliciano giggled at the remark, “That sounds like something Lovi would say.”

“Is it now?” Elizabeta laughed, pushing the door open with one hand before steering them both down the sidewalk and towards the parking lot. The air outside was bitingly bitter, the sun hidden away behind an overcast sky. Elizabeta unconsciously tightened her grip around the teen’s shoulders, knowing that he despised the cold weather — the result of some kind of incident he refused to talk about. Despite the chill, Elizabeta tried to keep her smile warm as she said, “Your brother acutally wanted to talk to us today, so we’re going to head on over now.”

“Really?” Feliciano breathed, his eyes sparkling in excitement.

“Of course, dear!” Elizabeta nodded, nearly laughing at the way his eyes lit up even more. “Lovino asks about you every day, he misses you a lot.”

“Oh, well…” Feliciano trailed off softly, his excitement fading just the smallest bit. “I-I really miss him too.”

The atmosphere felt just a bit heavier at the decidedly forlorn words, and Elizabeta wasn’t quite sure how to lighten the mood. She frowned to herself, picking up the pace to march down the street with a renewed vigor. She wanted to set everything straight once and for all, for all their sakes.

The short drive over to Lovino’s wasn’t necessarily awkward, but the relative silence that surrounded them was just a bit tense. Feliciano was distant after a stressful day, but Elizabeta made sure not to let him zone out entirely by checking in with him every few minutes. However, she recognized that he needed time to think things through on his own, so for the majority of the drive she let him be.

When they did finally arrive to the run-down apartment building, Feliciano seemed remarkably more lucid. He walked with a slight bounce in his step, no doubt excited to see his brother after not having the chance for a few days. Elizabeta allowed him to lead the way upstairs, the teen immediately skipping a sketchy-looking elevator to instead trudge up the stairwell.

As they climbed, Elizabeta couldn’t help but make some observations. The first of which was the most obvious, that this building was old. It wasn’t just old in the way that the architecture seemed out of place or faded, but the whole building just seemed dated. The dull linoleum floors looked like they hadn’t been cleaned in decades, and the pieces of decor that were present were caked in dust and dirt. The ceiling was cracked and scuffed, and the windows

looked foggy with filth. Elizabeta almost felt saddened, knowing that this building really would have been nice had it been upkept with any type of regularity.

Even as they emerged from the stairwell and into the hallway, Elizabeta couldn't stop making worrisome observations. She would never judge anyone for where they lived, but she really did wonder if Feliciano even noticed how truly run-down this building was. He bounded down the hallway excitedly, never sparing a second glance to chipped walls, and he skipped over the divets in the ground with unconscious ease. He was either unaware or unbothered by the state of the building, and briefly Elizabeta thought that Lovino was making the right decision.

Eventually Feliciano led them to one of the many identical doors that lined the hallway, bouncing excitedly where he stood as he waited for Elizabeta to catch up. When she stood at his side, he immediately turned to the door and knocked.

It couldn't be but a few seconds late when the door was blown wide open, Lovino not giving his brother time to so much squeak in surprise before he was crushing him to his chest, "Feli! How'd the interview go? Are you okay? I swear to God if they made you uncomfortable-"

"I'm fine, Lovi." Feliciano cut him off, patting the older awkardly on the back. "It's okay, they just asked a lot of questions."

Lovino sighed heavily in relief, loosening his grip so he was no longer literally crushing the younger. He pulled back just enough to make eye contanct, smiling the most genuine smile Elizabeta's ever seen from him, "Y'know, that tends to be how interviews work."

Elizabeta had to muffle a giggle with her hand when Feliciano shot her a knowing look, but his attention was pulled away when Antonio joined the group next, "Is that Feli?"

"Yeah, he just got here." Lovino answered, stepping aside to let the Spaniard through.

"Hi, Toni." Feliciano said softly.

Antonio smiled when he saw the teen, bringing his arms out wide, "Hey, how'd it go?"

Feliciano instantly dove forward to return the hug with a bright smile, his posture relaxing even further the longer he was in the presence of his family, "Um, really good I think. I'm just happy to be home."

"Glad to have you back, too." Antonio echoed, ruffling his hair when the younger pulled away.

As soon as his brother was released, Lovino instantly moved forward to throw an arm around his shoulders. Antonio lingered close as well, nobody wanting to be too far apart from the other.

Elizabeta watched everything silently, thinking that the three really did make a lovely family. Everybody seemed to balance each other out, nobody feeling any less important than the other. It really was a shame that such horrible circumstances had ripped them apart, but with

any luck she could help right that wrong. Nobody had yet to acknowledge her, so she cleared her throat to gain their attention, “Excuse me, would you mind if we came in?”

Perhaps realizing for the first time that they were loitering in the hallway, Lovino turned on his heel and guided his brother inside without a word.

Antonio rolled his eyes, yelling over his shoulder, “Lovi, don’t be rude!”

“Be nice to Miss Elizabeta, Lovi, she’s helping us.” came the muffled reprimand from Feliciano, but his voice was fading the further he was led inside.

Antonio turned back to Elizabeta with a sheepish smile, “Sorry about him, he’s just a little nervous right now.”

“That’s quite alright, dear.” Elizabeta said lightly, used to Lovino’s less than warm hospitality. “What is it you need to talk to us about?”

The sheepish smile on Antonio’s face suddenly turned apprehensive, his eyes looking around anxiously as he gestured inside, “Uh, I should probably let Lovi tell you.”

Elizabeta was a little thrown off by the sudden shift in mood, but she nonethless stepped inside when she was invited in. She looked around with an appraising eye, noting that their little apartment seemed much better maintained than the rest of the building. Just ahead of her was a kitchen which was connected to the living room on the right where Lovino and Feliciano were already sitting on the couch together. She herself was led to a small table that sat in the kitchen, and she took a seat at one of the chairs.

“We don’t really have much, but I could make you some tea or something.” Antonio offered, already moving to pull one of the cabinets open.

Elizabeta put a hand up, “Don’t even worry about it, I’ll be just fine.”

Sighing in what was probably relief, Antonio nodded, “Okay, well I think Lovi wants to talk to you still, but he’s with Feli so…”

“I can wait, there’s really no rush.” Elizabeta said kindly, glancing over to find that Feliciano was trying to muffle his laughter as Lovino gestured wildy with his hands. The two deserved some time together after everything, and especially with the uncertainty they were facing. Suddenly Elizabeta frowned, looking back to find that Antonio had taken a seat across from her, “How are you two doing?”

Antonio pursed his lips in thought, leaning forward to rest his head in his hand, “Better lately, although we’ll both be happier when this is all over.”

Elizabeta nodded seriously, “I think I will be too. Is everything ready?”

“I should be the one to ask that.” Antonio remarked lightly, although something in his posture betrayed his anxiety. “We haven’t told Feli yet.”

“I haven’t said a word either. Is that why we’re here?” Elizabeta asked, sparing yet another glance to the two brothers.

Antonio shifted nervously in his chair, one of his fingers tapping idly atop the table, “Originally, yes, but-”

“Hey, Toni come over here real quick.” Lovino yelled from the couch, eyes flashing in warning.

Antonio smiled sheepishly, shooting Elizabeta and apologetic look before he stood, “You could be a little more polite, Lovi.”

Any subsequent words were lost on Elizabeta, their speaking too hushed to be properly made out. However, they must have come to some kind of agreement because Antonio suddenly plopped himself down on the couch next to Feliciano (who was looking between the two with no small amount of suspicion) and Lovino was stalking his way closer to the kitchen table. Feliciano watched his brother go, mouth open like he was ready to protest when Antonio grabbed his attention by asking him about the interview.

Elizabeta watched Lovino sit down before her, keeping her voice low to ask, “What happened?”

“Nothing good.” Lovino mumbled, sneaking glances at his brother before asking, “Is all the paperwork done?”

“Don’t you worry about me, I have everything sorted.” Elizabeta said firmly.

Lovino offered a small smile, although it was forced, “How’s Feli been?”

Elizabeta felt some of her own apprehension melt away at the question, her shoulders relaxing as she nodded, “Much better, actually. He has some trouble speaking still, but he’s been making a conscious effort to eat.”

“Good.” Lovino breathed, turning to watch his brother talk animatedly with a giggly Antonio. It wasn’t clear exactly what they were talking about, but they were completely engrossed in their conversation. Lovino ripped his view away from them, asking shortly, “Do you think he’s better off with you?”

The question momentarily stunned Elizabeta, and for an instant she wasn’t exactly sure how to respond. She thought of all the progress the teen had made with her in just the short week they’ve known each, and she thought of how much more open he seemed as of late. Instead of isolating himself, he sought help, and to Elizabeta that was the biggest indicator that he was on the right path. She thought about the rough neighborhood that surrounded them, and even the worn-down and dirty building she was sitting in. Elizabeta wasn’t exactly sure what Lovino wanted her to say, but based on what she’s witnessed she could honestly say that the answer was, “Yes, I think he is.”

Lovino deflated, but looked wholly unsurprised. He nodded slowly, once again trying to force a smile up as he said, “That’s all I needed to hear.” He suddenly wrenched around in his

chair, calling over to the living room softly, “Feli, I need to talk to you.”

Feliciano instantly perked up, hauling Antonio up next to him so they could make the short trip over to the kitchen. Once everyone had taken a seat, he turned to his brother and asked, “What’s wrong?

Lovino shook his head, “Nothing, I just need to tell you something.”

With a short nod, Feliciano leaned forward expectantly in his seat. The teen waited with bated breath, the entirety of his attention fixed on his brother.

If Lovino was bothered by the intense staring then he didn’t show it, but that didn’t stop the shuddering breath that escaped his lips before he said, “Do you like living with Elizabeta?”

Feliciano frowned, not in displeasure, but in suprise. He pursed his lips, clearly not expecting such a question, but in the end he nodded, *“Sì,* she’s really n-nice and helps a lot.”

Lovino nodded, biting nervously at his bottom lip before he caught himself. He tried to work the tautness out of his body, visibly schooling his face into something more neutral so he could say evenly, “How would you like to live with her?”

Confusion was suddenly etched on Feliciano’s face, “But I already live with her.”

“No, I mean for longer.” Lovino said, struggling with himself before tacking on, “Permanently.”

Elizabeta waited nervously for some kind of reaction, resisting the urge to tap on the table with one of her fingers. She watched as Feliciano’s face cycled through shock, contemplation, realization, and then, the most worrisome emotion of all, hurt.

“You don’t want me?” Feliciano asked softly, sounding far too close to heartbroken for anybody’s liking.

Lovino recoiled at the small words, shaking his head vehemently, “No! I mean, I want you to live with us, but-”

“But I’m too messed up.” Feliciano finished sullenly for him.

Antonio jumped in this time, reaching a hand out to rest delicately on Feliciano’s shoulder, “That’s not it at all, Feli. We want nothing more than you to come back to us, but we’re afraid that we’ve already messed up our chances.”

Lovino nodded in agreement, “We really fucked up, especially me. This is the last thing we want, but if it’s between this hag and a foster home, then we’re going to go with her.”

While Elizabeta felt like rolling her eyes at the description, she resisted in favor of smiling warmly at the dejected teen, “We all want what’s best for you, sweetie. I can’t imagine how bad this feels right now, but we don’t want to lose you again.”

Feliciano fidgeted loosely with his hands, only stopping at a gentle reprimand from Elizabeta. He looked back up with a teary gaze, but in the end he nodded, “I-I guess that’s alright, then.”

He still looked unsure, but Elizabeta was going to take it as a win. She smiled sweetly at him, “Don’t worry, dear, you can visit your family whenever you want.”

“Whenever?” Feliciano asked hopefully.

“Damn straight.” Lovino said sharply, crossing his arms over his chest.

Antonio rolled his eyes at his boyfriend’s characteristic temperament, but turned to Feliciano with a warm smile, “We’ll be here whenever you need us, Feli.”

Feliciano looked between all three of them, eventually deflating where he sat. It would probably take some time to fully convince him that this was the best move, but at the very least he was going to go along with things, “Okay, I trust you.”

Elizabeta smiled brightly at the words, feeling beyond amazed of the teen for trusting so readily despite what he’s faced in his life. It felt like everything was falling into place once and for all, even going to court in just a day no longer feeling so daunting. Elizabeta would even go so far as to say that she was feeling confident with their odds, absolutely nothing left ahead of them but happiness and healing.

“Uh, there’s one more thing you should know.” Lovino mumbled.

All that optimism in Elizabeta’s head came to a screeching halt, not liking the tone of voice he used at all. She suddenly remembered how edgy Antonio had been acting earlier, and in an instant she was leaning forward with an imploring gaze, “What happened?”

Feliciano looked equally as troubled, and especially when Antonio leaned over to place a comforting hand over his shoulder.

Lovino kept his eyes fixed on the table, but his hands were clenched in fists, “I don’t know how the bastard did it but…”

“What happened?’ Elizabeta repeated, her veins running cold.

“They gave him bail.” Lovino suddenly snapped his eyes open, his expression a mixture of terror and rage, “He’s out.”

All the air left the room, the words ringing in the kitchen over and over again.

He was out.

Cristiano Valenti was roaming the streets.

Chapter End Notes

I.

am.

ALIVE.

Lol I'm back, y'all! Oh boy, it felt good to delete that note from last time! I'm glad I can finally get a loooong overdue chapter to y'all.

>:) Our villain is back (c'mon, you didn't HONESTLY think he'd go down without a fight, right?) and I am prepared for anger once again in the comments lmao

I really hoped you liked this chapter, if not that's cool too. Let me know what you think either way, I just love hearing you guys.

Okie that's all I got, I love y'all!

'Til next time!

Chapter 58

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lovino turned to look at himself in the mirror, clammy hands smoothing over the collar of his white dress shirt for the millionth time in the last ten minutes. He was trying not to work himself up into a panic, and he thought he was doing an alright job — well, so far. Lovino would be lying if he said he wasn't nervous. But that was fine, that was to be expected. As long as he didn't buckle under the pressure.

Everything was ready, or at least *mostly* ready. Lovino fiddled with the final button, hooking it closed before he really thought about it. After a moment he unbuttoned it. He bit his lip, thinking hard before he hooked it closed again. Then he unbuttoned it. Button. Unbutton. Button. He just couldn't decide! What was considered appropriate? Should he go for the pretentious businessman look or the casual, yet formal young bachelor? Did it matter? He didn't have a tie. Oh God, should he have a tie?

He unbuttoned the top.

Was he overthinking this? Most likely. Unfortunately, the recognition of that fact did absolutely nothing to ease Lovino's impossibly frayed nerves. He ran shaky fingers through his hair, attempting to work out any lingering tangles there. He met his own eyes in the mirror, raking over his short, skinny body, and his young (too young) face that was already wrinkled in places from his incessant frowning. He looked like a child playing dress up. Lovino looked away.

He buttoned the top.

Gilbert had been kind enough to lend both he and Antonio some formal attire because God knows they hadn't been able to afford nice clothing on their own. Lovino looked down at the black slacks he wore, cinched tightly at the waist by a faded belt he owned. He had a jacket, although he wasn't wearing it just yet, and he'd even taken a trip to a barber shop for a fresh trim.

It was too bad that the clothes didn't fit correctly, they would have looked nice. As it was, they were just a tad too big, although Lovino had done his best to pin it tighter where he could. He pulled the sleeves back so they no longer engulfed his hands, once again feeling like a child who got into their parent's closet.

He unbuttoned the top.

Was it noticeable that these clothes didn't belong to him? Did it matter? But their size may be an indicator of their financial state of… well, their *lack* of finances at all. Wasn't that exactly what he was trying to avoid? Would this reflect poorly on him in court? Did he look utterly ridiculous right now?

Lovino's hands fumbled furiously with his shirt, buttoning the top.

As Lovino stood battling internally with himself (and externally with the damn button), Antonio padded softly in behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, Lovino could see his boyfriend's reflection smiling rather amusedly at him. He pouted, forcing his hands to stop messing with his shirt to growl an irritated, "The hell you looking at, bastard?"

Antonio's smile only grew, sauntering closer to turn Lovino around so he was no longer facing the mirror. Antonio was also wearing a borrowed suit, although he fit it much better. Instead of engulfing his body, it hugged him like a glove. It was almost a perfect fit, his boyfriend looking far more mature, more refined than Lovino could ever hope to be. All of a sudden, Lovino felt very self-conscious. He had to avert his eyes.

"None of that, *mi amor."* Antonio chuckled, tilting Lovino's head up with a finger under his chin so their eyes met.

Lovino did his best to maintain eye contact, but it was a losing battle. He bit at his bottom lip, his heart beating so quickly he had to bring a hand over it for fear it would burst free. They were going to court today, the pressure so immense Lovino thought he might be crushed.

Antonio shifted his hand from Lovino's chin to the collar of his shirt, smoothing it down, "You look good."

Lovino couldn't help it, he cracked a smile, "So do you."

Instead of commenting on the uncharacteristic compliment, Antonio moved his hands from the collar to the top button, fiddling with it. "Are you almost ready to go?"

Lovino nodded, but he couldn't force his voice to work. Just the thought of the daunting task ahead of them made him feel light-headed, so he pulled his lip between his teeth in an effort to distract himself from the horrible churning in his stomach.

"You're nervous." Antonio pointed out, unbuttoning the button he'd been messing with before smoothing the fabric over.

"What gives you that impression?" Lovino mumbled sarcastically.

"Well, you haven't cursed me out yet." Antonio finally removed his hands from the younger entirely, but it hardly lasted. He brought a singular hand up, pressing the back of it to Lovino's forehead with an expression of mock-concern, "Hmm, no insults either. Are you feeling alright?"

"Idiot, knock it off." Lovino said with a small smile. He reached up to the hand on his forehead and pulled it away, but he didn't release it. Instead, he brought it up to his face palm up, studying the individual lines there.

Antonio let him turn his hand back and forth, his smile slowly slipping from his face. He glanced at the clock, turning back with something like regret, "We really do need to go, Lovi."

“I know, just…” Lovino was still studying the palm in his grasp, idly tracing the lines there, “...just give me another minute.”

Antonio sighed, but allowed his hand to be used as a distraction. He was patient, letting Lovino work out whatever lingering anxiety he had by restlessly fidgeting with his hand. Antonio shivered at the featherlight touch to his palm, wincing when the grip suddenly became painful, “Lovi-”

“Sorry.” Lovino said, releasing the hand at once. He looked down in embarrassment, fists clenching and unclenching at his side. His shoulders ached for how tense they were, and his lips were chapped and abused after literal hours of chewing on them. He glanced at the mirror, hating how disheveled he already looked.

Antonio sighed, threading his fingers through Lovino’s hair in a calming gesture. He reached a hand under Lovino’s chin before tilting it gently up again, “You’re thinking too much.”

Lovino scoffed, “You’re not thinking enough. Seriously, how do you look so calm right now?”

“Do you really want to know?” Antonio asked with a cheeky smile. He tried to wink, but he only ended up blinking both eyes rather pitifully.

Lovino snorted at his tragically *not*-smooth boyfriend and said, “Oh, I’d *love* to.”

Antonio’s smile morphed into a grin right before he tugged Lovino upwards and pressed their lips together. Unlike his, Antonio’s lips were smooth and unblemished, the warmth they radiated enough to chase away Lovino’s anxiety for just a blessed moment. He didn’t retaliate, he merely closed his eyes and hummed softly in contentment.

Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately), it was over quickly, and Antonio pulled back with a dopey little smile, “Whenever I’m nervous, I just think that my Lovi is still with me, and it makes me feel better.”

Lovino felt his face light ablaze, the heat from the kiss overcome by the fire under his skin. He breathed in deeply through his nose and out his mouth in an effort to contain his amused smile, “That’s so fucking gay.”

Antonio’s laughter was like a song for how bright and airy it was, pressing a quick peck to Lovino’s forehead before stepping back, “That’s the point, *mi vida*. Now let’s go, we have a case to win!”

With at least some of his anxiety assuaged to a manageable degree, Lovino felt remarkably more confident. Antonio offered an arm, trying once again to wink (it went about as well as last time). Lovino choked on a bark of laughter, looping their arms together with a muttered, “Idiot.”

There were about a million things to worry about right now, but they could handle it. They had to, just for a little longer.

Everything was going to be okay, it was going to be fine. Wonderful. Fantastic. Things would go smoothly, nothing would go wrong. Feliciano repeated this over and over in his head like a mantra, trying to keep himself calm.

Things had been going wrong for months on end, but that couldn't go on forever. Everything was going to be okay. Right? It was going to be fine. Right? This was only one of the most significant things to ever happen in his life, but that didn't mean it wouldn't go well. Right? It would be over quickly, and he'd go home with Elizabeta. It was going to be fine. Feliciano would remain calm.

Right?

Oh, who was he kidding?

Feliciano was a nervous wreck, pacing restlessly back and forth in his room as that facade of calm meted away. He was already dressed in a nice pair of dark, charcoal slacks and a light grayish-blue button up that fit his frame rather nicely. He had just pulled his socks on, but had neglected to slip into his shoes before his agitated pacing began. Luckily, the room that he'd been lent (which was now effectively *his)* had plush white carpeting, so he wouldn't wear down the thin fabric of his socks.

Unfortunately, the pacing paired with the socks on carpet caused a bit of electricity to charge the space around him. So, when Feliciano's hand unintentionally brushed against the wooden nightstand, he was zapped by the sharp sting of electricity.

Feliciano yelped in surprise, instantly sticking his pointer finger in his mouth to try to ease the pain. It faded quickly, although the short incident left him feeling even more on-edge than before. He paced with a renewed vigor, mumbling under his breath just how *fine* today was going to go.

The sudden sound of approaching footsteps followed by a crisp knock on the door made him jump, a cheerful voice filtering through, "Feli? Are you almost ready, dear?"

Feiciano nodded quickly before he remembered that Elizabeta couldn't see him. He cleared his throat, cringing when he still stumbled clumsily over his words, "Um, I-I think."

There was a pause, Elizabeta's cheery voice taking on a gentler tone, "Can I come in?"

Again, Feliciano nodded, but was quick to correct himself, "Yeah."

The door creaked quietly open, Elizabeta sticking her head through the doorway with a closed-lipped smile. She waved as she emerged fully into the bedroom. When her eyes landed on the fidgety teen, that smile broadened into something undeniably proud, "Oh, you look so handsome! You're growing into a fine young man."

The comment fully distracted Feliciano from his nervous pacing, his face heating up as he looked away with a small smile, "Thank you. Um, you look n-nice too."

Elizabeta beamed at the compliment, squealing in delight, "So polite!"

She really did look nice dressed in a tight black pencil skirt that stopped just above her knees, a long-sleeved white blouse tucked neatly in. On her wrist sat a silver bracelet, accented by the modest chain necklace with a heart charm sitting delicately over her top. She, unlike Feliciano, had already thrown her shoes on — a pair of simple, yet elegant, black heels that added around three inches to her height. Her chestnut-brown hair bounced playfully down her back in loose waves, one side pinned to the side of her head by a forest green clip in the shape of a flower.

They were both dressed nicely enough for a wedding. Or a funeral. Feliciano frowned, not wanting to compare this hearing to a tragic event. It was going to go fine… right?

Feliciano twisted his lips to the side in thought, absently tugging at his sleeves. He paid particular heed to the right one, wanting to keep that horrid mark hidden away. It was hard to forget about the burn with the way the fabric dragged uncomfortably across the tender skin. The constant reminder that it was there, that he was on his way to face down the man who put it there, caused his heart rate to double.

Elizabeta noticed the sudden shift in demeanor, taking a handful of cautious steps forward until she was close enough to put a hand on Feliciano's shoulder. She wordlessly led him to the bed, pushing him gently down before sitting next to him. After another beat of silence, she said, "I know how nervous you must be, but I promise that everything's going to be alright today."

Feliciano nodded, wanting for himself to believe that. Everyone around him seemed confident, but he couldn't forget about the fact that Cristiano was out of jail doing… *something* that would probably throw a wrench in their plans. Feliciano had briefly met with Lovino's attorney the previous afternoon, and he voiced his worries about his father coming in to mess everything up. Tino had more or less dismissed his concerns, saying that even if the man showed up to the hearing, there would be no conceivable way for him to be awarded custody. Feliciano believed the man's conviction, and he agreed with him too.

So why did his stomach still churn with dread?

"Honey, can you look at me?"

Feliciano jumped, not realizing the spell he'd been caught under. He looked up with a sheepish smile, relaxing at the expression of open confidence and reassurance he was met with. Elizabeta had this strange ability to smile with her eyes alone, and she was doing it now. Feliciano wondered how she could stay so cheerful.

"Is your wrist bothering you?" she asked with a pointed look to his hands.

Still battling with a spell of dazedness as he was, Feliciano hadn't noticed that he was still tugging harshly at his sleeve. He forced his hands to cease in their restless pulling, shaking his head slowly side to side, "Um, I-I mean it always bothers me."

"Does it hurt?" Elizabeta asked gently, like she was afraid such a question would trigger something.

Feliciano thought about it, twisting his wrist to the side to gauge what kind of discomfort he was experiencing. Sure, the fabric dragged uncomfortably across the spot, but it wasn't necessarily *painful.* Well, so long as she didn't mean mental pain. The mark tormented him, but not in a physical sense, so with a shrug he said, "Not really."

Elizabeta looked at him skeptically, but let the matter go, "If you say so. We need to leave in a few minutes, but I wanted to talk to you before we go."

"What about?" Feliciano asked.

Elizabeta breathed in deeply, looking vaguely apprehensive for just a moment before she pushed her smile back up, "I just want to make absolutely sure that you'd be happy living with me. If you're not, then I'd like for you to tell me now."

Feliciano froze for just an instant, not thinking that his own happiness would be considered in this. To him, this was a matter of being placed with the person he would inconvenience the least, or at the very least to the person who stood the biggest chance of winning in court. Not once had anyone asked what he wanted, and he was quickly finding that he couldn't piece together an answer.

Ideally, he'd like to live with his brother and Antonio. Apparently the two still planned to fight for him in court, but they weren't hopeful. It stung just a bit to realize that they were most likely going to be seperated, but Feliciano believed Elizabeta when she said that he could visit whenever he wanted. On top of that, he really did like how calm it was in this house. There wasn't the constant activity that characterised the small apartment he'd previously called home. It was calmer here. Peaceful.

The silence left in the wake of Elizabeta's gentle command persisted past what was comfortable. Elizabeta must have interpreted that as a negative thing because she was suddenly frowning with a contemplative expression, "It's really okay if you'd rather not stay with me, you know. We could figure out some other arrangement, you just have to let me know."

Feliciano shook himself out of his silent musings, finally finding his voice at the disappointment he heard, "No that's not it. I-I really like it here." He paused for just a moment, tacking on softly, "It's quiet, and I feel safe."

It seemed as though those small words obliterated whatever reservations Elizabeta still had because she bounced right back to her normal cheerful self. She snaked an arm around the teen's shoulders, pulling him in for a short side-hug, "Oh, that's just wonderful to hear!"

Feliciano hardly ever felt uncomfortable with Elizabeta's spontaneous hugs anymore, this time being no exception. He smiled when she pulled away, and followed her when she stood and moved towards the door. They needed to leave soon, but for some reason the task of going to court didn't seem so daunting anymore.

Elizabeta's heels clicked on the dark hardwood flooring as they walked down the hallway, Feliciano dragging an idle hand down the smooth drywall as they walked to the front door. Elizabeta threw her coat around her shoulders, handing Feliciano his own. He was just about

to take a step forward, to exit the house and into the cold unknown, when Elizabeta's bright laughter gave him pause.

Feliciano looked up in confusion, wondering what was so amusing.

Elizabeta merely pointed down at his feet, giggling into her hand, "I don't think it's appropriate to show up shoeless!"

Indeed, Feliciano looked down to find he had completely neglected to throw his shoes on. He squeaked in embarrassment, face flushing a deep red as he rushed back down the hallway.

The laughter that followed him was infectious, and Feliciano felt a small smile tug at his lips. Maybe everything would be okay after all.

Why, oh why, did Lovino ever choose to willingly spend time with someone as airheaded as Antonio? Why did he subject himself to such ditziness on a disturbingly regular basis? He was a glutton for pain, apparently. There was no other rationale why Lovino put up with his boyfriend practically *skipping* down the damn sidewalk with their hands linked in between. They were both grown men, this was humiliating!

"I can't take you anywhere." Lovino grumbled, wanting to hide away for the embarrassment he currently felt.

Antonio smiled, swinging their arms in an even wider arc in a blatant display of defiance, "I think you like it."

"I hate you." Lovino groaned, but he didn't drop their hands. Antonio loved these little gestures even though it made Lovino want to bash his head into a brick wall. Still, a part of him appreciated it if only because it lightened the mood.

They were both impossibly nervous, even if only one of them openly showed it. But Lovino wasn't fooled by his boyfriend's bright smiles or flippant attitude in the least bit — he could feel his sweaty palms, could see how tense he walked. Antonio was every bit as anxious as Lovino, but he refused to show it.

Despite the horrible anxiety that permeated the atmosphere, the weather was almost perfect. The sun's rays combated the biting chill, the absence of any clouds ensuring the warmth was felt in its entirety. They were downtown, in the heart of the city. People were bustling up and down the street, most with their heads down or with a phone pressed firmly to their ear. Buildings reached up towards the sky on all sides, but one building in particular immediately caught Lovino's attention.

Just ahead of them, slowly materializing down the street, was a large brick building. White columns stood proudly in front and a large staircase laid the path towards a tall wooden door. There were accents of gold around the windows, the building bearing imperiously down on them. It was the courthouse, Lovino recognized it from the last time he was there. Suddenly he felt all his anxieties spring to life again, his grip tightening exponentially on Antonio's hand.

Antonio noticed the sudden pressure, immediately ceasing his obnoxious arm-swinging. He squeezed back, although not nearly as tight, “Are you okay?”

Lovino audibly gulped, only barely remembering to nod in response. Quite frankly, he was terrified. He was held hostage by the fear that he’d once again fail his brother, that something would go wrong and he would have to bear the guilt and shame of inadequacy all over again. Despite their ultimate plan to allow Elizabeta to take custody, Lovino still planned to put up a decent fight. The best case scenario was that he would win the case, but in the likely event that he failed, then he would negotiate with the judge to ensure Feliciano would stay in Elizabeta’s care.

Somebody had come to inspect their apartment earlier in the week, recording everything in a little notebook to be considered during the hearing. The man that the court sent hadn’t been impressed, and Lovino briefly thought about how nice it would be to lay claim to his inheritance — he hadn’t had time to look into it with the flurry of activity surrounding them. The financial assistance would have definitely come in handy right about now, but there wasn’t any use in wishing impossible things into reality.

The building was now looming directly over them, and Lovino was trying not to feel too intimidated. They stood at the foot of the stairs, pausing for just a moment. Lovino took in a deep breath, exhaling slowly before turning to Antonio, “Are you ready?”

“I sure hope you are.”

Antonio’s jaw hung wide open, although he hadn’t uttered a word. Lovino froze, craning his neck to the side to see just who chimed in. There, leaning against the handrail of the stairs, was a horribly familiar figure. Lovino ground his teeth at the sight, his heart pounding madly in his chest, *“You.”*

“Remember, you promised not to do anything until *after* the hearing.” Antonio whispered quickly in Lovino’s ear.

Lovino nodded stiffly, although a large part of him was begging him to lunge at the man that was standing just a few feet away. Cristiano looked bored, inspecting his nails on one hand with a careless gaze. He was dressed in a suit, clearly in preparation for the hearing in just a few short minutes — a fact that shocked Lovino. He didn’t think the man would dare show his face, especially with all the evidence stacked against him.

“Look, I just want to talk.” Cristiano said gruffly.

Lovino glared, ignoring Antonio’s protests by sidestepping him and approaching the man, “Why should I listen to a word you have to say?”

Cristiano shrugged, “I don’t care if you listen or not, but it may be worth your while to hear me out.”

Antonio was right behind Lovino, trying to pull him away, “C’mon, let’s just go.”

But Lovino wanted to know what that meant, shrugging his boyfriend away, “What are you talking about?”

Cristiano sighed, back to checking over his nails, “I hear your brother took a troublesome video of me.”

Lovino couldn’t help the sudden smirk, feeling all different kinds of smug, “He sure did, bitch.”

“Yes, well I think it goes without saying that it’s not a good look for me.” Cristiano grumbled, finally looking up to glare at his eldest son. “Delete it.”

“Fuck no.” Lovino said, almost laughing at the absurdity of the request. “Why in the hell would I do that? You lost, and I’m going to make sure you rot in prison.”

Cristiano rolled his eyes, “Not going to happen, I’ve got it covered. I might have made an error, but I can still make your life miserable. Just delete the video, and we’re done.”

Lovino quirked an eyebrow up at that, “Do you seriously think you’re getting custody after all that bullshit you pulled?”

“No, actually.” Cristiano said, waving his hand dismissively in the air. “I don’t need *full* custody as it turns out, but that’s none of your business. Just delete the video and things will be much easier for you.”

Lovino took a step forward, once again ignoring the borderline desperate tugging on his sleeve by Antonio. He stared right up at his father, no longer afraid of the man, “Fuck. You.”

The man didn’t look shocked, just disappointed. He sighed heavily, gesturing up the stairs towards the court building, “Then shall we go?”

Instead of responding, Lovino reached back and grabbed Antonio’s arm. He dragged the Spaniard behind him, muttering under his breath, “Oh, it’s on, you piece of shit.”

Antonio scrambled to catch up, casting nervous glances over his shoulder as Cristiano just watched them go. He was dragged up the stairs behind his irate boyfriend, whispering softly, “Lovi, is everything alright?”

“It will be.” Lovino said confidently, pushing the doors open with no hesitation. The brief encounter set him ablaze with determination, and he was finally prepared to set things right. He spotted Tino a short ways off, waving when the blond spotted them.

Tino met them both with a firm handshake, his face alight with a self-assured smile “Are you ready to go?”

“Hell yes.” Lovino replied immediately.

Antonio shrugged, “Let’s do it.”

“Alright then, follow me.” Tino said, leading them down a hallway and towards the end.

Chapter End Notes

Hoooooly shit guys, I am SO sorry for the impromptu hiatus! I had the most serious case of writer's block, you would not believe XD I worked on one of my other stories for a while, writing and deleting chapters for this story in the process. I'll try not to leave you for so long again!

Anywayyys, I hope you liked the chapter! The calm before the storm, some might say. I had to sneak a little more fluff in lol

Thank you so much for reading this freaking monstrous fic! It's so long, I have no self-control pls send help XD

Okie, that's all I got! Love y'all, and lemme know what you think.

'Till next time!

Chapter 59

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"All rise."

Antonio stood along with the rest of the room, watching nervously as a door opened from the back. He was behind a table next to Lovino, Tino standing on the other side of his boyfriend. The courtroom was a large, open room, lit only by the yellow lights above. Faded, graying hardwood floors stood in stark contrast to the warm wooden trim that characterized the whole room, a large podium where the judge will shortly preside directly in front of them. Behind them stretched a dozen or so rows of benches, and while Antonio knew Feliciano was sitting there with the rest of their witnesses, he couldn't bring himself to look back.

"The honorable Judge Lucille Martin presiding." announced the same guard as before.

In walked a petite young woman, modest heels clicking dully against the faded wooden flooring. A long, black robe flowed down to her ankles, blond hair tied in a braid resting on her shoulder. She walked with confidence, a folder stuffed to the brim with documents shoved under her arm as she walked to her seat.

As Antonio watched the woman settle in her seat, his eyes very briefly met Cristiano's across the middle walkway. The man maintained eye contact, smirking as Antonio hastily turned away. His heart was in danger of bursting free from his chest, but he ignored it. He couldn't afford to show weakness, not now.

"Thank you, please be seated."

Antonio sat, tapping his foot on the ground. He looked to his side at Lovino, offering his boyfriend a shaky smile. Lovino simply nodded in response, ashen face betraying his nerves.

Sitting high above the rest of the room on her bench, the judge began her opening remarks, "This court is assigned to the complaint for child custody between the plaintiff, Lovino Valenti, and the respondent, Cristiano Valenti."

Lovino huffed at the surname, but was silenced at a sharp look from Tino.

"This is a show cause requested by the plaintiff as to an order entered to this court on the fifteenth of September. Are all parties ready to proceed?" There was a slight accent to her words, but only barely. She peered at both parties over her rectangular spectacles which sat on the bridge of her nose.

"Yes, your honor." Lovino answered in the strongest voice he could muster.

The woman looked to the other side, and Cristiano echoed in a much stronger tone, "Yes, your honor."

“Alright, Mr., um…” she squinted at her documents, lips moving around a word that couldn’t quite escape.

Tino cleared his throat, “Väinämöinen, your honor. But just Tino is fine.”

Judge Martin nodded her head, accepting this with little fuss, “Very well, Mr. Tino, you may call your first witness.”

Tino nodded once at Lovino, gesturing to the stand. With an audible gulp, Lovino stood and made his way to the bench directly to the judge’s right. The woman eyed him seriously, “Raise your right hand.”

With a nod, Lovino did as directed.

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?”

“Yes, your honor.” Lovino said.

The woman nodded, a clear indication for him to take a seat. Lovino did, bumping the edge of the table rather clumsily. He sent a squeamish look Antonio’s way, every movement he made indicating that he was right on the verge of panic.

Antonio smiled, trying to offer what little comfort he could.

It seemed to be enough, because Lovino’s shoulders relaxed and he gave an imperceptible nod to Tino to begin.

After a beat, the lawyer did, “Mr. Valenti.”

Vargas, Lovino mouthed, but only Antonio caught it.

“You’re here today petitioning for guardianship of your brother, correct?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m the best fit for my brother. I know what he needs and what is in his best interest.”

This was the rehearsed bit, what Tino and Lovino (and to a lesser degree, Antonio) had come up with. It was measured, and what most judges wanted to hear.

Tino nodded, “And why would Feliciano be any worse off with your father?”

A brief flash of rage washed over Lovino’s features, but Antonio was proud to note that his boyfriend was able to bury it before answering, “He’s abusive.”

There were some muttered whispers behind him, but Antonio still couldn't bear to take his eyes away from the stand.

"Can you explain what you mean?" Tino prompted.

Lovino nodded slowly, "He would push my brother, my mother, and myself into things. I was pushed down the stairs as a child, and he would put cigarettes out on our skin. He's also a drunk, and most of the time, it would make things much worse."

"What evidence do you have to substantiate this?" the judge interjected, her icy blue eyes peering neutrally on.

With a shuddering breath, Lovino hitched up his sleeve as best he could, "I don't have much, your honor, but both my brother and I have many scars."

Antonio watched as Lovino hiked his sleeve up just enough to reveal a cluster of scars on the back of his arm. He heard a few muffled gasps of shock, and he could honestly empathize. He himself remembered the first time he saw that awful scarring, how it had made his blood run cold and his heart race. It still felt like a knife twisting in his gut every time he remembered why those scars were there.

"My brother's art teacher has also put together some notes. He's the one who called the cops." Lovino said, lowering his sleeve as he laid out what evidence they had. "And there's also a video of *him* hurting Feli. He took it on my phone, and if that's not enough evidence, then I don't know what is." his words had grown fiery by the end, smoldering glare set on his father.

Antonio also levelled a glare at the man across the aisle. Cristiano was watching with a pensive expression, seemingly unconcerned with the evidence against him. Antonio looked away, biting his lip at the anxiety he suddenly felt.

"I believe you have already reviewed the video, correct?" Tino asked the judge.

Judge Martin nodded once, betraying nothing of her true emotions

Tino nodded back, like they were exchanging some sort of secret conversation. The atmosphere in the room was tense, and it was only bound to get even more so. Tino cleared his throat, continuing in his examination, "Lovino, how would you describe your relationship with your brother?"

"We're close." Lovino said immediately. "Always have been, we rely on each other."

"And how long have you lived on your own?"

"Six months, ever since our grandpa died."

Judge Martin cut in next, "And in those six months, would you say that your finances have been stable?"

Lovino looked up, eyes wide for just an instant before he could put a mask of confidence back up, “If I’m going to be completely honest, not really.”

“And you plan to take care of your brother with what money?” Martin asked.

“Well, none right now, but-”

“But that will change.” Tino chimed in, not giving Lovino enough time to talk himself into a corner. “Your honor, Lovino is old enough to claim his inheritance, which will put them in a prosperous enough situation.”

“Can you be certain of that?” the judge asked, cool. Calculated.

Tino nodded, “Yes, I will personally see to it.”

Judge Martin considered the words for a moment before ultimately gesturing with one hand for them to carry on, “Very well.”

Antonio was sitting at the edge of his seat, feeling the heat of a steady gaze on his back. He really couldn’t tell if that gaze was Feliciano or Cristiano — it could honestly be either. But he was so tense that he still couldn’t turn around to see just who was staring so harshly at him.

“Okay,” Tino said, clapping his hands together with a smile. “I only have a few more questions. Walk me through a normal day at home with your brother.”

“Well, usually I have to drag Feli’s butt out of bed.” Lovino huffed with a fond roll of the eyes. “He loves to sleep in, but we always manage to get him to school…”

The next few questions were more to do with Lovino and Feliciano’s relationship, and Antonio was feeling better now that the topic was fairly light. Apparently the point of these softball questions was to portray Lovino as a caring, level-headed individual. Throughout it all, the judge watched unflinchingly, the utter neutrality in her gaze nearly driving Antonio insane.

“Thank you, that is all.” Tino finished, taking a step back.

Judge Martin nodded, stacking a neat little pile of notes cleanly in front of her. She nodded once to the opposing side, “Mr. Smith, you may now cross-examine the witness.”

Another man in a black suit, sandy blond hair slicked back and streaked with grey, stepped up to the podium. He cleared his throat, offering a brief thank you to the judge.

Tino sat next to Antonio, who leaned over and asked, “What’s a cross-examination?”

“It’s when the other side gets to ask questions.” Tino whispered back. “Everything is timed and structured very carefully, and since Lovino is the one who filed the dispute, the other side gets the last word until the closing remarks.”

“That sounds like a disadvantage.” Antonio mumbled.

“It is.” was the simple response.

“Mr. Valenti,” the opposing lawyer, Smith, began, “You say that you have your brother’s best interest at heart, but I have serious doubts.”

Antonio didn’t like this man’s tone, it was condescending. He glanced at his boyfriend, seeing a scowl of annoyance overshadow his expression.

“First of all, you have been unemployed for how many weeks now?”

Lovino glared, crossing his arms over his chest in a huff, “A couple.”

“A number please, Mr. Valenti.”

“That’s Vargas to you, and it’s only been a few.”

“Six, to be exact.” Smith carried on, apparently unbothered with the petulant attitude he’d been met by. “Six weeks. That’s a month and a half. And if I do recall, the reason you lost your job was because-”

“That slimy bastard ratted me out.” Lovino hissed.

Judge Martin looked down in disapproval, “If you would refrain from using unsavory language in my court, that would be most appreciated.”

Lovino’s expression immediately softened, something like anxiety playing across his face, “Yes, your honor. Sorry.”

“So that’s what they’re going to do.” Tino muttered.

Antonio glanced to his side, “What do you mean?”

“If I recall, Lovino has quite the temper on him.” Tino responded, tapping his foot anxiously on the floor. “And quite the mouth, too.”

“Yeah, he always has.” Antonio whispered back, but his attention was pulled away when the questioning continued.

“So you have been working under fake documents, you have been convicted of forgery and fraud, yet you still believe you can provide for your brother?”

“Hey, at least I’m not an abusive piece of -” he cut himself off, only barely holding his tongue with a nervous glance up to the judge.

Smith continued, “And who has been providing an income for you?”

“Antonio has.” Lovino bit out gesturing towards the Spaniard. “And he still has his job.”

“And what is the nature of your relationship with this Antonio?” Smith said with a smug grin.

Tino was already standing up and out of his seat, but not before Lovino answered:

“Does it even matter? What the hell are you trying to insinuate?”

“Nothing at all, only that you two are having relations, and my client and I are not comfortable placing a child in the care of-”

“Of *what?”* Lovino yelled, launching himself upwards in his anger.

“Of two men who cannot possibly provide the same that a traditional household can-”

“Objection!” Tino yelled, stomping in front of the table with a ferocious glare. He stalked his way towards the front like a tiger ready to pounce, his typically gentle demeanor completely gone.

Antonio himself had half a mind to join the small lawyer, but he was able to restrain himself. Just barely.

Judge Martin nodded to Tino, “You may proceed.”

With a loud huff of annoyance, Tino dug into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He was clearly still feeling the effects of his sudden rage, but was able to school his expression back from a vicious glower to an annoyed scowl. He pushed the phone up towards his ear, not saying a word.

The silence that suddenly engulfed the room was fraught with a type of awkwardness that Antonio couldn’t quite pinpoint. It was like all of the previous intensity had died… only it hadn’t really. It was still there, bubbling just underneath the surface.

A rhythmic tap echoed dully through the room, and it took Antonio a moment to figure out that Tino had actually started bouncing his foot up and down as he waited for… something. He still had the phone pressed to his ear, humming along to some unheard melody.

The other lawyer in the room had a confused scowl, the man looking back and forth between Tino and Judge Martin like they were in on some joke that he was not allowed to know. He must have gotten fed up, because he was suddenly scoffing in annoyance, “What are you-”

Tino silenced the man by raising single finger sharply up.

Smith had the gall to look offended, like he hadn’t just been attacking his and Lovino’s relationship like it was something disgusting that he couldn’t stand. Smith turned to the judge with an appeal, “Your honor, this is hardly the conduct expected of an attorney.”

“I’ll allow it.” Judge Martin said with a curious tilt of her head. “But Mr. Tino, I have to agree. Who are you calling?”

That must have been what Tino was waiting for because he turned abruptly on his heel to glare at the opposing attorney, “Oh, nobody. I just need to tell my *husband* and my *son* that apparently I can’t provide the same as a traditional household. Is that right, Mr. Smith?”

Antonio instantly clapped a hand to his mouth to keep from laughing, his shoulders hitching up in mirth when he understood what Tino was doing.

Smith's jaw hung wide open, anything he planned on saying next blasted to the wayside when Tino spoke up again:

"My poor family, I just can't provide financially for them anymore. Being an attorney with a private practice is *incapable* of putting dinner on the table, or providing for a child with a history of abuse. I guess being with another man completely negates how much I love my family." Tino rolled his eyes, tone dripping with sarcasm.

"Your honor, this is ridiculous." Smith said, shifting uncomfortably where he stood.

Judge Martin had just a ghost of a smile on her lips, the most expression Antonio had seen from her thus far. To her right, Lovino was choking on his own laughter.

"Very well, Mr. Tino, you have proven your point." the judge said.

Tino responded with a sharp nod, turning back to sit huffily next to Antonio.

Lovino wiped a tear from the corner of his eye, most of his rage drained completely out of him. He smirked as he settled himself back on the bench, crossing his arms in a self-assured way.

Smith looked ruffled, clearing his throat a few times before getting back on track, "Right, well that still does not detract from the fact that you are convicted of forgery."

"Misdemeanor forgery." Lovino responded at once, rolling his eyes rather flippantly. "And I only did it so I could work. There was no other option, either I fudged a few numbers on a document, or we all starved. Take your pick."

Smith scoffed indignantly, "You speak as if the law means nothing to you."

"You speak as if decency means nothing to you." Lovino shot back. He pointed in the direction of Cristiano, not looking at him when he said, "Look, that man put me and my brother through hell. I may not be a perfect person, but I'm damn better than him. Got it?"

Antonio's heart swelled with pride, and especially with the way he noticed Cristiano's face darkening. It was a fantastic hit, and the judge didn't even reprimand Lovino on his language this time around. Even if Antonio still felt anxious, even if he could still feel those unknown eyes boring into the back of his skull, that one line from Lovino made him hopeful that they could win this case. After all, it wasn't like Cristiano had any witnesses of his own. They had this.

"I will reiterate: Lovino Valenti has repeatedly broken the law, has refused to find a new job, and is far too young to bear the responsibility of taking care of a minor. He has no income, and his reliance on another person for stability is hardly becoming of a guardian. That is all, your honor." Smith finished lamely, turning back to sit next to a cool, but glowering Cristiano.

"Very well. Mr. Tino, you may call your next witness." Judge Martin said, motioning for Lovino to take his seat.

With a heavy sigh of relief, Lovino stood and began the process of vacating the bench. But just before he stepped back, something caught his eye. He froze, his face slowly draining of all color. Antonio doubted he was even breathing.

Lovino blinked twice, shaking his head before he forced himself to move. Even the way he walked seemed too nervous, too measured. It was like he was fighting to appear normal, but that didn't fool Antonio — not for one instant.

"What's wrong?" Antonio whispered as soon as his boyfriend sat down.

"Nothing." Lovino answered hollowly.

That wasn't reassuring in the least bit. Antonio craned his neck to force their eyes to meet, noting with some trepidation that Lovino's pallid expression was growing more ashen by the second. He clapped a hand on the smaller's back, feeling those eyes on his back bore into him with much more ferocity at the action. A vicious shudder ripped through his frame, but Antonio ignored it, "You did well up there, I'm proud."

"Yeah." was the lackluster response.

Antonio glanced very briefly to Cristiano, finding that the man was smirking at them. Something was seriously wrong, "What happened?"

That urgent question caught Tino's attention, the small lawyer turning back towards them with a curious look.

"I should have known I wasn't the target." Lovino muttered under his breath, leaning forward to cradle his head in his hands.

That created more questions than it answered, and Antonio was getting seriously worried, "Is something wrong?

"Just…" Lovino took in a shuddering breath, shooting a wary glance over his shoulder before answering, "Just whatever you do, don't look behind you."

That wasn't a good sign. Antonio gulped, knowing at once that he was going to disobey Lovino's orders and sneak a look behind him. He would have followed Lovino's guidance in any other situation, but this was too important of an event to be unclear on any details.

"Listen to me." Lovino hissed, grabbing Antonio's hand in a vice-like grip. "I know what you're thinking, but I really don't think it's a good idea. We'll handle it later, but we need to stay focused right now."

Well, now Antonio *really* wanted to know what was wrong. Anxiety picked at his insides, making his hands clammy from sweat. He bit at his bottom lip, his mind a battleground as he tried to figure out what to do. On the one hand, Lovino sounded deathly serious about this, and most of the time, Antonio would heed his warnings about important matters. But Antonio felt almost honorbound to know what was happening, to prepare himself now so he could

have a clear head for the rest of the hearing. If he didn't look now, it would distract him, and then he might make a mistake. They couldn't afford that.

With an apologetic look that Lovino instantly recognized — shown clearly in his betrayed expression — Antonio turned in his seat to look behind him.

Then he wished he listened to his boyfriend.

Feliciano was there, next to Elizabeta directly behind them. The teen looked a little queasy, but still optimistic. Elizabeta offered a little wave.

But behind them, even further back, sat two individuals. A man and a woman.

"Oh shit." Antonio muttered.

"Who are they?" Tino asked, following both of their gazes.

Antonio gulped, turning back to face forward. His hands started to shake, tears instantly in his eyes. He felt Lovino snake an arm around his shoulders, felt the warmth that his arm provided, but mostly Antonio felt lost.

He breathed in a shuddering breath, exhaling before whispering, "Oh, them? They're my parents."

Chapter End Notes

BOOM cliffhanger after i took a month off. Oof, sorry about that.

Things have been going crazy for me, I'm hella busy and I really can't even give an estimate as to when I can get chapters out. Just know that chapters w i l l come out for this fic (it's not abandoned, author is just slow lol).

ANYWAYS, I need to put a disclaimer on this chapter and the following ones because not all the information here is completely accurate (as far as court proceedings and stuff). So this is a civil case, not the ones you may see on television (those are usually criminal) and there are a few differences. I am trying to keep info accurate, but I am sacrificing some accuracy for the sake of the story and drama. Pls bear with me, it won't be outlandishly inaccurate, just a few things here and there that I will try to point out in the author's note.

Okie, long note. I'm glad I could finally get this out. Let me know what you think, I appreciate you all for reading :)

'Till next time!

Chapter 60

Chapter Notes

Brief mention of suicide throughout the chapter. It's only mentioned, just be aware :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Crimson sunlight filtered delicately through dusty window panes, the watery sunset causing shadows to stretch and twist over the rolling Italian countryside. The smooth wooden floorboards, well-weathered and soft after decades of being tread upon, hardly made so much as a creak as socked feet glided over them. The cream walls were bare save the shimmering sunlight that gilded the interior of the small bedroom.

A rustle just outside the faded door caused those socked feet to halt in their restless pacing — a muffled conversation from further down the hallway, and then laughter. Then it stopped, moved somewhere deeper in the house. Antonio resumed in his pacing.

His eyes were bloodshot, nearly the same color as that dwindling sunset, and if he looked in the mirror he would find tousled hair sticking haphazardly up. The shadows were getting longer, but Antonio refused to flip the light on. He didn't want to see what he had become.

He mumbled wordlessly under his breath, seeing a calendar on the wall out of the corner of his eye. Antonio approached it, swiping a pen off his desk as he moved closer. He exed out another day. The fourth day. He was starving.

Antonio dropped the pen on the ground, not bothering to put it back on his desk. He brought a hand up to clutch the crucifix that hung around his neck, but he didn't pray. He'd forgotten how to, or at least, forgotten why he should.

With a heavy sigh that aged him beyond his sixteen years, Antonio dropped his hand. He cringed when the band of plastic around his wrist scraped lightly against the skin there. He looked listlessly at the plastic wristband, a souvenir from the hospital, he supposed.

Antonio's stomach rumbled harshly, so he wrapped an arm around his middle to muffle the sound. He wondered when he would get fed, *if* he would get fed. He would welcome anything at this point, but he supposed that would defeat the purpose of the fast — to bring him *closer to God,* or something of that nature.

With nothing to do but stew on his own poisoned thoughts, Antonio was feeling more hopeless than he ever had. He was afraid of himself, of his family and how long they would keep him here in limbo. He needed a distraction. Maybe a meteor could destroy Earth, or a great flood could wipe out all life. Really anything was preferable to this.

There was a knock on his window, a swift little pattern of taps.

Antonio groaned, mumbling under his breath, “Okay, maybe not anything.” He stomped over to the window, glare already fixed in place. He pried it open, hissing before he could even process who was there, “Lovino, I swear to-”

“Toni!” cried a voice, one that was far too young to be Lovino. Feliciano stood below, just tall enough for his eyes to peer over the window sill and into Antonio’s room. The boy cast his eyes around nervously, every once and a while looking over his shoulder.

Antonio’s expression instantly softened, “Oh, hey Feli. Sorry, I thought you were Lovino.”

Feliciano shook his head, “Um, Lovi would actually be really mad if I was here, so…”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be our secret.” Antonio whispered with a cheeky wink.

Despite his edgy behavior, Feliciano giggled into his hand, “Thanks.”

The sound of a gavel hitting wood snapped Antonio back to reality. He looked around with wide eyes, concerned with the way Lovino was shaking his shoulder.

“C’mon, snap out of it, you bastard.” Lovino was whispering. “Seriously, the judge is giving us weird looks.”

Antonio shook his head, coming back fully to reality. He met Lovino’s deep hazels with his own glazed eyes, offering a small smile, “Sorry, I zoned out for a second there.”

“You think?” Lovino mumbled.

Tino pulled a chair up between them, fixing Antonio with a serious gaze, “We have like three minutes tops before all this whispering looks suspicious. You’re going up to the stand next, are you going to be okay?”

Honestly, Antonio had no idea. He sent a short look over his shoulder, finding his mother’s disappointed frown lying in wait for him. He turned away, shaking his head, “Um, I don’t know.”

“What happened between you and your parents?” Tino asked.

Lovino cut in, a mildly protective look in his eyes, “They disowned him, they shouldn’t even be here.”

“Why?” Tino hissed, foot tapping rapidly on the ground.

“It doesn’t matter now, does it?” Lovino growled.

“Yes, actually it does matter, because they were brought in as witnesses.” Tino said pointedly.

“Uh, well…” Antonio cleared his throat, finally able to reclaim his voice after a handful of stunned seconds. “My childhood wasn’t exactly easy either.”

“I’m going to need more than that.” Tino said, shooting another glance over his shoulder.

Antonio started twisting his hands in his lap, the nervous action only ceasing when Lovino put his hands over them.

“They don’t accept him, let’s leave it at that.” Lovino said with finality.

Unfortunately, Tino wouldn’t accept that, “I don’t think you understand, I need to know *everything* that happened or else the other side has an advantage over us. We only have a few minutes, at least give me an idea about what happened.”

The lawyer was right, but it was still difficult for Antonio to admit it out loud. He took in a deep breath, smiling gratefully when Lovino interlocked their fingers. He turned to Tino, nodding his head, “You’re right, I’m sorry. It’s just, when I found out I had feelings for Lovino, I had a bit of a crisis. I asked for help, but… well…”

“It didn’t go well, did it.” Tino sighed, motioning with one hand for him to continue.

Antonio gripped Lovino’s hand for support, “No, it didn’t. They didn’t believe in things like mental illness, I didn’t even know what depression was. I just thought something was wrong with me, and… and-”

“Look, they’re going to try and make Antonio sound like he’s crazy, but he’s *not.”* Lovino growled, rubbing his thumb gently back and forth over Antonio’s hand. “What happened in the past is in the past.”

“What happened?” Tino immediately asked, paying no heed to Lovino’s words.

Antonio hunched his shoulders in shame, “I overdosed.”

“So what are you doing here, Feli?” Antonio asked, trying to hide his painfully bloodshot eyes from view by turning his head.

“Oh, well, I haven’t seen you in a while and I just thought…” Feliciano trailed nervously off, twisting his hands in front of him. “I thought you might be hurt.”

Antonio smiled after the boy, although it was subdued. He wondered just how far the news of his little hospital trip had travelled, “I’m doing just fine.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, voice shaking imperceptibly.

Antonio nodded, scrubbing at his eyes to rid any lingering tears that had been there. Even if Feliciano was only eleven, the boy was perceptive about things like this. The last thing Antonio wanted to do was worry him — Lovino might get involved if Feliciano threw a big enough fit. Antonio couldn't afford that, couldn't bear to see Lovino right now, so he sought to distract the younger by saying, "Of course! You went over to your grandpa's last week, how was that?"

Feliciano still looked dubious, but hesitantly accepted the change of topic, "Um, it was nice. *Nonno* made really good food, and Lovi got some sleep."

"Good, that's good." Antonio said distractedly, nervous with the mere mention of Lovino.

"Yeah, Lovi's been super worried about you."

And with those few words, Antonio was back to feeling sick with guilt. With shaky hands, Antonio reached up and gripped the crucifix that hung around his neck, "I'm fine, you don't need to worry about me."

"But-"

"I'm *fine!"* Antonio said, just shy of a shout.

Feliciano recoiled at the tone, tears suddenly gathered in the corner of his eyes, "I-I'm sorry, I-"

"No, I'm sorry." Antonio said, closing his eyes before counting to ten in his head. Feliciano didn't deserve to be on the receiving end of his misdirected anger, not when none of this was his fault. "I'm sorry, Feli. I'm okay now, you don't need to worry."

"But I am worried!" Feliciano cried, hands fidgeting nervously in front of him. "Lovi's really worried too! He said he had to call an ambulance for you, and it was really scary and-"

"Wait, what?" Antonio asked, cutting off the nervous babbling at once.

Feliciano nodded his head rapidly up and down, "Yeah, he said that he came over here because you left your football at our house, and you were on the floor and wouldn't wake up, and he was so scared that he called the ambulance for you!"

Antonio's breathing picked up at the new piece of information. The catalyst for all this, all of these conflicting feelings in Antonio's heart, was Lovino, and of course the fiery teen was the one who saw him in such a state. Shame exploded inside of Antonio's chest, and suddenly he couldn't bear to look at the boy in front of him, "Leave."

"What?" Feliciano asked, head twisting confusedly to the side.

"I said, *leave!"* Antonio yelled this time, pointing harshly to the boy's house that sat around a half kilometer away. "Get out of here, I don't want to see you around here anymore!"

"But why?" Feliciano asked, bottom lip trembling.

Antonio was already angry at himself for causing distress to Feliciano, but he couldn't bear to live with this shame. His parents were right, he was diseased. *Wrong.*

Feliciano was still awaiting an answer, so Antonio slammed his window closed and stomped away. He threw himself on the bed, pulling his blanket tight around his shoulders.

"Damn." Tino mumbled under his breath, fingers drumming idly on the table. "And when were you planning on telling me this?"

Never, was what Antonio would say if he was being honest, but he didn't want to admit that out loud. Insead, he shrugged.

Lovino looked queasy, but his voice was steady, "So we all had shitty childhoods, so what? Like I said, the past is in the past."

"Well, the *past* is currently here." Tino said, something like annoyance coloring his tone. "And the *past* is probably going to screw us all over if you keep hiding things from me."

Lovino scoffed, "We're not *hiding* anything, we just-"

"Neglected to tell me pertinent information that could make or break this case." Tino finished for him.

"Hey, even if we lose, we still have Elizabeta." Lovino hissed, crossing his arms like he won their little argument. "It doesn't matter what that asshole digs up about us, it'll be fine."

"I'm not here to lose." Tino said, biting out the word like it burned his tongue. "And besides, I still have to negotiate with the judge to make sure that you're allowed to even *see* your brother after this."

"Who says I won't be able to see him?" Lovino said flippantly, waving a hand dismissively in the air.

Tino groaned loudly in frustration, "The judge if she thinks one of you is mentally unstable enough!"

Lovino rolled his eyes, "Well thank God neither of us are unstable, right?"

"Wrong."

Both heads swivelled to Antonio, who was currently hunched over the table. He had his head in both his hands, breathing long gone shallow.

Lovino instantly dropped his combative attitude, clapping a heavy hand on his back, “It’s been years since all that happened.”

“It doesn’t matter.” Antonio mumbled, tapping his foot harshly on the ground. “If I go up there now, they’re going to bring up every mistake I made as a teenager. I don’t want to lose this for us, Lovi.” He looked up, bottom lip trembling.

Lovino shook his head, “Then don’t go up.”

“But-”

“He has to.” Tino said, looking down at his watch. “In thirty seconds, actually.”

Lovino rounded on the lawyer, “Listen, if he doesn’t feel comfortable, then he doesn’t have to testify.”

“Unless he wants to be charged with contempt of court, he has to.” Tino said, no malice in his tone, only sympathy. “I know it’s going to be difficult, but by law you have to go up there. You’ve already committed to being a witness, it would cause more damage if you backed out now.”

Antonio drew in a shuddering breath, nodding once. There was no choice, he had to own up to his own past just like Lovino and Feliciano were forced to. He stood right as the judge motioned for proceedings to get back underway.

Lovino still looked rather disgruntled, but he squeezed Antonio’s hand for support, “Good luck, and don’t let that asshole lawyer push you around.”

Antonio nodded. He walked up to the stand like a dead man to the gallows, refraining from turning around until he absolutely had to. When he did finally turn, his eyes unconsciously found his parents’. Found his mother’s.

“Stupid, stupid, *stupid!”* Antonio yelled, punching his pillow in rage. He couldn’t believe he yelled at Feliciano like that, slammed the damn window in his face. How was it possible that he was such a shitty person? He yelled at a *child,* slammed a window in the face of a *child.* Honestly, he wouldn’t blame Lovino if he came over just to kick his ass.

Lovino.

With a groan, Antonio flipped on his back and pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes until he saw stars. How dare that Italian menace inspire such confusing feelings in Antonio’s heart? How dare he destroy Antonio’s entire life by just existing? He wasn’t even allowed to *eat* until his parents believed he had sufficiently repented for what they believed to be a mortal sin.

“I’m sorry!” Antonio yelled at his ceiling. He wasn’t sure who he was apologizing to, but he felt the need to scream his repentance until his throat was raw.

The plastic band around his wrist suddenly felt like a million pounds, weighing him down until he couldn’t move. So he lay on his bed, unmoving, unseeing, as silent tears raced down his cheeks. Eventually his hand found its way up towards his neck, gripping the pendant he wore there.

The sun had gone down completely, those cool shadows wrapping around Antonio’s body, but still he lay frozen. Maybe if he laid still enough, he’d merge with the bed and become inanimate. He thought he’d like that, but the last time he tried something similar, he ended up in the hospital. But there were no pills this time, so maybe it couldn’t hurt to try-

“Antonio?”

That was his mother. Antonio sniffled, not raising his voice beyond a whisper, “Yeah?”

Despite the softness of the words, his mother must have heard him, “May I come in?”

“Sure.” he answered hollowly.

María pushed the creaky door open, padding silently inside with a soft smile. She immediately flipped the light on, causing Antonio’s eyes to scrunch up against the light. María laughed lightly at the reaction, sitting down without permission at the edge of his bed. She patted her son’s legs, “How are you feeling?”

Antonio shrugged, not bothering to so much as turn his head so their eyes would meet.

“Use your words.” she reprimanded.

Antonio cleared his throat before offering an answer, “I’m fine.”

“You don’t sound like it. What’s wrong, *mijo?”* she asked, pulling her long, chestnut brown hair off to the side and over her shoulder. María rested her hand on Antonio’s ankle, patting it a few more times to try and coax a response out of him.

Eventually, Antonio did offer something of an explanation, his voice small when he asked, “Is there something wrong with me?”

María smiled sweetly, emerald green eyes glinting as sharp as a razor’s edge, “Of course there is, sweetie. But we’re going to fix you.”

Antonio nodded, wanting with all his heart for that to be the case, “I’ll do anything.”

Anything to stop feeling like this.

“Even if that means never seeing those two boys next door ever again?” she asked lightly, tapping a finger over her bottom lip in thought.

“Never again?” Antonio breathed, brow furrowed as he contemplated that.

“That disgusting boy made you confused, he tried to make you disgusting too.” María said with a heavy sigh, shaking her head in apparent sadness. “I’m afraid you may be too far gone for us to help.”

Antonio’s head whipped up at that, already shaking it back and forth, “No, don’t say that, *mamá!* I promise, I won’t ever talk to Lovino again.”

With a sharp nod, María stood, “Good boy, your father will be happy to hear it.” She began walking away, apparently satisfied with their short conversation. Her sandaled feet scraped lightly at the hardwood floor, and she didn’t even spare a look back as she glided across the room and towards the door.

Antonio watched her go, conflicting emotions exploding in his chest. And then his stomach. All of a sudden, he remembered he was actually starving, so he sat up in the bed and called, “Wait, is it alright if I have dinner with you tonight?”

María stopped in her tracks, smiling back at him over her shoulder, “Was it okay for you to disgrace this family and God by trying to kill yourself?”

Antonio ducked his head in shame, eyes finding the plastic band around his wrist, “No.”

“Then you have your answer.” María said shortly, continuing her departure. But just before she left, she said, “I’m doing this for you, I want you to be happy. I love you, Antonio.”

“I love you too, *mamá.”*

This was too much, he couldn’t do this.

He was standing in front of the bench, eyes locked with his mother’s. Her green eyes shone as coldly as they ever had, accentuated by the harsh fluorescent lighting. His hands began to shake as the staring match persisted, everything in Antonio begging him to bolt right then and there.

“Mr. Carriedo, are you alright?” Judge Martin asked, her steady blue-eyed stare betraying nothing of her true emotions.

“Uh, w-well…”

Tino must have sensed how unstable he was right now because he instantly stepped in with the save, “Excuse me, your honor, I know it’s early still. But may I request a short recess?”

Judge Martin quirked a questioning eyebrow up, “Mr. Tino, it has not been thirty minutes yet.”

“Yes, but you understand this is heavy subject matter.” Tino said, shaking his head solemnly to himself. “Even a five minute recess would be gracious, just to give us a moment to breathe.”

Smith scoffed, “He’s stalling, their witness is not prepared.”

“He is perfectly prepared, but please excuse him for feeling a little overwhelmed given the nature of this case.” Tino said with a glare, clearly still not over this man’s attack from earlier. “Not all of us go to court for a living, Mr. Smith.”

“Five minutes.” Judge Martin said definitively, despite a certain lawyer’s protests. “Not a moment more than that, Mr. Tino. I have other cases to hear today.”

“Yes, your honor. Thank you.” Tino said, bowing his head.

Antonio also squeaked out a short *thank you* before retreating back towards his boyfriend. Once there, he buried his head in his hands.

“You have five minutes to get a hold of yourself, what do you need?” Tino asked.

“I don’t know!” Antonio said in frustration. He felt like he was about to lose it entirely.

Lovino threw an arm over his shoulders, ducking down so he could whisper in his ear, “Listen, when you get up there, this is what you’re going to do. You’re going to look your parents dead in the eyes for however long you need to freak out for, and then you’re going to look at *me* for the rest of the examination. Just me, nobody else.”

Antonio shook his head, “How can I when they’re sitting right behind you?”

“Because you’re stronger than them. They were brought here to intimidate you, and dammit it’s not going to work!” Lovino said, tightening his grip around his shoulders.

“Two minutes.” Tino whispered.

“I’m not stronger than them, Lovi. They’re going to ask me about everything, and I’m going to lose the case for us, and we won’t see Feli anymore and-”

He was promptly shut up by a firm kiss to his lips, Lovino pulling away as quickly as he had approached. Distantly he could hear somebody (his mother) scoff at the action, but Antonio was just a little too stunned from the sudden action to respond with the proper amount of shame.

Lovino was smirking, cheeks dusted a light red, “C’mon, what happened to all that gross shit about feeling better because *your Lovi* is here?”

Antonio managed a small smile at that, heart rate finally slowing to a healthy pace, “Did you really just kiss me in front of the judge?”

“Like she gives a shit.” Lovino said with a flippant roll of the eyes. “If she has something against our relationship, she would have shut Tino down when he was pulling that sassy shit

with the phone."

"I guess…" Antonio said, still just a little edgy.

"You have like fifteen seconds." Tino said.

"Go." Lovino said, a reassuring smile on his face. "You'll be fine, just keep your eyes on me."

With one, long inhale, Antonio nodded, "Okay, I'll try."

"That's good enough, let's go." Tino said, gesturing towards the bench.

"Eyes on me." Lovino said, settling back down with a serious expression.

Antonio nodded, and when he turned around this time, his eyes didn't dare drift towards his mother or his father. They were fixed solely on Lovino, and that was where they would stay.

Chapter End Notes

Dang I got this one out fast. I hope to be able to update like I used to (for those who weren't around in the beginning, I was posting a new chapter every three or four days). Oh, to have time to do that again.

Anways, I hope you liked the chapter! Antonio's past is kind of heavy, and I'm super excited to explore it more in the prequel I'm writing (this is actually a bit of an excerpt, so sneak peek I guess??) But yeah, I know this fic has already been dark as shit, but I still feel the need to put a warning out there about this stuff.

Also, Lovino being a strong, supportive boyfriend? It's more common than you might think lmao

Let me know what you think, I'm excited to wrap this thing up (but not without the necessary drama first ;))

Alright, that's it!

'Till next time!

Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was freaking out, perhaps the only thing keeping him calm being the vice-like grip he had around his phone. Ludwig texted him back with regular frequency, but currently Feliciano couldn't find it in himself to send anything — he was frozen to the spot, made hyper-aware of his surroundings due to the way his brother and Antonio kept glancing over their shoulders.

It was abundantly clear that something was wrong, what with the way Tino had to ask for a break after seeing Antonio's face drain of all color. To make matters worse, the judge had just given a warning for the end of the recess and Antonio *still* looked like he was going to pass out… or throw up. Maybe both. Feliciano might do both.

His teeth tore viciously into the soft flesh of his bottom lip, the indents his teeth left behind a testament to how harshly he was chewing. The inside of his cheek wasn't holding up much better, and he nearly tore right through the skin in surprise when the judge's gavel hit wood.

Feliciano watched Antonio walk to the stand, still looking squeamish, but not debilitatingly so. He was itching to know what had left him and his brother looking so nervous, but there was nothing for it now. All he could do is sit and wait for his turn. Next. He was next. *Oh God, he was next.*

"Sweetie, are you alright?"

That was Elizabeta, she was seated to Feliciano's immediate right. She'd been the picture of calm and collected this entire time, right now being no exception. Her eyes shone with concern, the appearance only reinforced when she placed a gentle hand over his own — both of which were trying to crush his phone.

With a deep breath, Feliciano tried to loosen the grip he had on the small device, "I'm okay."

"If you need a break, we can head outside for a little bit." she whispered back.

Feliciano shook his head. Even if the atmosphere in the courtroom was borderline unbearable, he wanted to witness the outcome himself. After all, it was *his* life at stake, he ought to see how it panned out: "Um, I-I want to stay."

"Okay then, if that's what you want." Elizabeta replied with a kindly smile, lightly patting his hands before folding hers neatly in her lap.

"Mr. Carriedo," said Tino, thoroughly snapping Feliciano back to the action at the front of the courtroom, "you've claimed to know both Lovino and Feliciano for how long?"

Antonio cleared his throat, eyes locked with Lovino's when he said, "Uh, going on thirteen years now."

"And how did you three meet?"

"We were neighbors." Antonio said, his voice gaining more confidence the longer he spoke. "In Italy, that is. My… my parents and I moved next door when I was nine."

"And how would you describe the relationship you three had?" Tino pushed.

There was a flash of regret over Antonio's face before he gave his response, "I'm not going to lie, it was rough in the beginning. Me and Lovino fought a lot, but I was always pretty close with Feli."

Feliciano unconsciously nodded along, remembering that part of his childhood well. Antonio had been kind to both he and Lovino at the very beginning, but his brother had been pretty relentless. Eventually, Antonio started fighting back, and a bitter rivalry had formed. Feliciano always remained in the middle, and usually he was able to broker peace between the two long enough for a game of football. Those short little matches had been the highlight of his childhood, bar his grandfather — and even then it was close. It was one of the few times he actually felt like a kid, and he still cherished those memories dearly.

Tino hummed in apparent thought, like this wasn't completely rehearsed, "And your relationship now?"

Antonio smiled, and had Feliciano not been a hopeless romantic himself, he would have gagged at the positively adoring look he shot Lovino before answering, "Well, Lovi and I managed to sort out our feelings, so I would say it's much better."

If that wasn't the understatement of the century. Feliciano very nearly chuckled at the deep blush that ran down Lovino's neck at the statement, but something tore his attention away before he could. It sounded like a scoff of disapproval, Feliciano twisting in his seat to see who made the noise.

There weren't many people in the room, so it was pretty easy to locate the origin. There, only a few rows back, was a middle-aged couple. The woman had greying brown hair twisted up in a bun by a large clip. Her lips, painted a burgundy red, jutted forward to form a defined little pout. To her side was a man with equally greying brown hair, clipped short. Behind his glasses, he was glaring, though not with the same intensity as the woman. They were both tan, familiarly so, and briefly Feliciano felt like he knew who these people were.

"Um, Miss Elizabeta?" he whispered.

Elizabeta turned her attention to the teen beside her, "What is it?"

Feliciano pointed discreetly behind him, "Who are they?"

She turned in her seat to get a look, not nearly as discreet as the younger, "Hmm, I'm not too sure." Elizabeta twisted her lips to the side in thought, turning back to the front before

glancing back again. She looked in between the couple and the front of the room a few more times before remarking, “They kind of look like Antonio, don’t you think?”

Feliciano was just about to respond when his phone vibrated. He looked down, realizing that he must have neglected his conversation with Ludwig long enough for him to start worrying:

From: Ludwig

Is everything going alright?

He glanced up to see that Tino was asking some fairly generic questions, almost the same that he’d asked Lovino. Besides his brother nearly flying off the handle at the greasy lawyer earlier, he could honestly say that things were going well.

To: Ludwig

Yeah its fine. Toni’s going right now

Feliciano sent the message, folding his hands over his phone in his lap. He glanced very briefly behind him to get a look at the scowling couple. Now that Elizabeta mentioned it, they did strike a startling resemblance to Antonio, and once again he felt like he recognized them. Maybe they were Antonio’s parents, it would certainly make the most sense. But even if they were, Feliciano had no idea why they would be here. He couldn’t remember sharing a single conversation with either of them — neither had been around very often. He did, however remember them being mean. Not nasty, or cruel, but *mean.*

Suddenly, the woman’s eyes snapped to the side, locking with Feliciano’s. Her gaze was smoldering, hellfire alight in her emerald-green irises. For just a moment, Feliciano couldn’t remember how to breathe, so struck by the intensity the woman could convey with just one glance.

It wasn’t dissimilar to the way Elizabeta sometimes looked when she was upset with something (like when Gilbert had knocked over a glass when he was dropping off some paperwork one day). But unlike Elizabeta, whose gaze was full of goodwill and a stern sort of kindness, this woman glared like she was the only righteous being in a room filled with demons.

A shudder worked its way through Feliciano’s body, but once again his attention was pulled away by a text:

From: Ludwig

You’re going up next, right?

As if he needed another reminder. Feliciano closed his eyes for just a moment, trying to rid his lingering anxiety before responding:

To: Ludwig

ya, I’m really nervous

Feliciano looked at his screen, not sure if he should add anything else. Finally deciding that was good enough, he put his phone down and looked back up towards the front. For all his earlier thoughts about wanting to pay attention, he'd done a pretty lousy job thus far.

"I didn't know for a long time." Antonio was saying, looking thoroughly ashamed of himself. "I never thought to question why Lovi was always so tired or why Feli panicked over raised voices. I tried to make it up to them the best I could, and things got much better."

Tino nodded solemnly, "You moved in with them, correct?"

"Yeah, Mr. Vargas took me in after I left home." Antonio said, just a ghost of a smile on his lips. "I would say that was when I started seeing both Feli and Lovi as family."

Feliciano nodded along, his lips also quirking upwards. Antonio ran away from home, and with nowhere to go, he sought out the only person who could possibly help. Roma, being the kind man he was, took him in without question. Feliciano agreed with Antonio when he said that was the first time they really considered each other family, and especially after Antonio and Lovino started dating (and that was a whole ordeal in and of itself).

At the front of the room, Tino was giving his final remarks, "... a stable relationship with Feliciano, and he has held a steady job for nearly a year now. Your honor, stability is what a teenager needs, and I believe that Antonio and Lovino can provide that. Nevermind the mistakes he made as a child, Antonio has proven himself to be a mature, loyal person through all this uncertainty. That is all."

Judge Martin nodded, the blond woman staring imperiously down from her bench. She was, in a word, intimidating — a figure that demanded respect from the very way she carried herself. She gestured for Tino to take his seat, saying shortly, "Very well. The defendant may cross-examine the witness."

Feliciano noticed the way Antonio tensed up, like he was about to face his executioner. Even Tino seemed a little less sure than before, his posture not nearly as confident.

"Mr. Carriedo," Smith began, a sense of overbearing smugness apparent in his tone, "it has been said in rather unsubtle terms that you are 'stable,' but that's not true at all, is it?"

Antonio shifted nervously in his seat, and he didn't look at the man when he answered, "I'm sorry, I'm not sure what you're talking about."

Smith smiled, the look positively vicious, "Your honor, I have concerns about placing a teenager in the care of two people who can scarce provide for themselves. Mr. Carriedo, in particular, cannot possibly be entrusted with a teenager with his… shall we say, troubled history?"

Feliciano wasn't sure what the man was referring to, but it couldn't be good given the way Antonio tensed up further.

"In fact, I would dare say that Mr. Carriedo's history is cause for concern even today." Smith continued, relishing the moment by pacing back and forth. "Perhaps we should think twice

before-”

“Mr. Smith, if you would please get to the point. We have a tight schedule to adhere to.” Judge Martin interjected when the man got just a bit too carried away.

Smith cleared his throat, nodding once before finally addressing Antonio, “Mr. Carriedo, would you kindly explain what happened when you were sixteen? That is, right around September.”

Antonio was looking increasingly unsure, eyes locked with Lovino’s as he tried to piece together a response, “I’m not sure-”

“Remember, you’re under oath.” Smith cut in.

Feliciano glared at the man, irritated with the way he acted so smug. He mentally encouraged Antonio to bite back, to relax in his seat and dismiss whatever claims the man was trying to make. But that’s not what happened. No, Antonio shrank away.

“Um, if you’re referring to when I was admitted into the hospital-”

“Precisely that.” Smith interrupted yet again, nodding seriously like he was unravelling the great mysteries of life. “Would you mind explaining why exactly you were admitted?”

“Well, I-I…” Antonio coughed into his hand, whether to clear his throat or stall for time, it could’ve been either one. He opened his mouth before closing it, hanging his head in shame before ultimately deciding to stay silent.

It was jarring to witness — Antonio, the stablest of the three of them, losing his composure was the last thing Feliciano expected to witness that day. It made something unpleasant twist in his stomach, his confidence that the day would end in their favor starting to slip.

“Your honor, if the witness does not wish to speak, then I will answer for him.” Smith said, his smile already dripping in victory. “When Mr. Carriedo was sixteen, a mere five years ago mind you, he attempted-”

“I attempted suicide.” Antonio said evenly, dead-eyed stare fixed straight ahead.

Feliciano’s breath hitched in his throat. He knew that Antonio struggled with himself and some sort of depression in the past, but to hear him admit so openly that he would do such a thing was like a punch to the gut.

Smith faltered for just an instant, obviously not expecting such candor. But he was quick to shake it off, nodding seriously, “Yes. So then you can see, your honor, my obvious hesitance to place a teenager with someone like-”

“Like me?” Antonio mumbled, although his voice was still loud enough to carry across the spacious courtroom. His eyes were downcast, posture slumped, “To be honest, I kind of agree with you.”

Feliciano shook his head, wholeheartedly disagreeing. This clearly wasn't part of whatever plan his brother and Tino came up with, both of them watching dumbstruck in their seat. Hell, even Smith was shocked into complete silence, anything he had planned on saying having dissipated on his tongue.

Antonio cleared his throat, continuing on in his soft admission, "I wasn't a great kid, I had a lot of problems that I didn't know how to handle. I hated myself. For years I tried to imagine a future where I was happy, but I never could. So, I did the only thing my stupid teenage mind could think of." his eyes finally snapped up, glaring at Smith with such intensity that the man didn't dare interrupt this time. "So no, I don't think placing a teenager in my care is a good idea. I mean, I'm only twenty-one, I'm still trying to figure life out myself."

"So why exactly are you here then, Mr. Carriedo?" Judge Martin asked curiously.

Antonio glanced up at the woman, his expression no longer unsure, "Because I can't let Feli go back to that man. Even if it's not with me or Lovi, I want him to be safe, your honor."

Judge Martin nodded, considering his statement. She gestured wordlessly for Smith to continue, settling back in her seat with an appraising eye.

The man did after just one more beat of silence, "Right, so from what I'm understanding, you're not seriously pursuing custody."

Antonio squirmed in his seat, offering a half-hearted shrug, "I mean, we're being realistic. Me and Lovi are too young to be seriously considered, right?"

Feliciano couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn he saw Tino throw a hand to his forehead in exasperation. The little lawyer was shaking his head, trying to get Antonio to stop talking.

Smith nodded slowly, something like realization dawning in his face. He smiled, taking a step back, "I have no further questions, your honor."

For some reason, Feliciano felt like Antonio just made some sort of mistake. Probably because Tino looked about ready to scream in frustration. Feliciano didn't like how ready Smith was to cease in his questioning, and especially after Antonio let slip what game they were playing.

Antonio must have been of the same mindset, his eyes blown wide in shock. He was slow to stand, looking like he'd expected much harsher questions than what he actually received.

Feliciano chewed on his bottom lip, once more glancing over his shoulder to get a look at the couple from earlier. The woman's eyes were fixed on him. Feliciano swiftly looked away, his stomach doing strange flips, "Um, Miss Elizabeta, I don't feel very good."

Elizabeta instantly turned her attention to him, "What's wrong?"

"It's just-"

"Mr. Tino, you may call your next witness."

Feliciano's shoulders shot up to his ears, shrinking back when not only his brother and Tino, but Cristiano turned to look at him. On top of that, Feliciano could have sworn he felt the eyes of that woman on his back, the sensation like needles piercing his skin. Not painful, but definitely uncomfortable.

"Sweetie, you need to breathe." Elizabeta whispered, rubbing small circles in his back.

Feliciano inhaled deeply, alarmed to note how shallow his breathing had gone without him even noticing. He turned to look at her, relaxing imperceptibly at the soft smile she offered, "I-I'm sorry, I'm just nervous."

"I know you are, but you're going to do great." Elizabeta said, sounding like she sincerely meant it.

"We're calling Feliciano to the stand." Tino said, smiling encouragingly at the teen as he gestured for Feliciano to make his way towards the front.

"Remember, if they ask anything that makes you uncomfortable, you don't have to answer." Elizabeta whispered. "And if that doesn't work, I'll distract the room enough for you to escape." she characterised the statement with a teasing smirk and a wink.

Had Feliciano not felt so nauseous with anxiety, he would have laughed. However, he could do little more than nod as he stood on shaky legs. He tried to keep his eyes fixed ahead, only occasionally drifting to where his brother was trying to make his smile look sincere. But unfortunately he couldn't help but glance very briefly to his left, where his father was sitting.

Their eyes met for a brief second, but that moment felt like an eternity. Cristiano looked bored, arms crossed over his chest as he stared his son down with familiar amber eyes. There was not an inkling of uncertainty in his dull gaze, and once again Feliciano had the feeling that they were missing something.

Feliciano had to tear his eyes away, afraid that he'd back out. He didn't want to do this, but his fear of being dragged back to Italy with that man against his will overpowered that traitorous thought in his mind that told him he could run right out of the courtroom.

With a shuddering breath, Feliciano glanced behind him. He saw Elizabeta, smiling and giving him a thumbs up. But behind her, still watching with that smoldering gaze, was that ill-tempered woman. She watched him carefully, like she was waiting for something to happen. Feliciano nearly stopped walking, jumping when a hand was placed delicately on his shoulder.

Tino was there with a reassuring smile, steering him towards the front, "Are you ready?"

Feliciano swallowed around the lump in his throat, nodding once.

"Okay, you got this." Tino whispered.

"Yeah." Feliciano mumbled, standing at the front of the room. He could feel the eyes of everybody on him, his skin alight as if each pair of eyes shot knives through his body. He

breathed in deeply, saying to himself with confidence he didn’t have, “I got this.”

Chapter End Notes

Ayyooo, back at ya with another chapter, hope everyone's thriving and healthy!

So fun fact about civil cases like this -- they usually run on a tight schedule. Tbh, custody cases don't usually have a big hearing like this unless something significant has happened. BUT I wanted drama, so here's drama. Also, it is fairly rare for the child to actually sit in on the case, but Feli's 16 so he has more rights than say, an eight year old. But, as everything involving the law, it is very case by case.

Okay, enough legal garbage from me. I hope you liked the chapter! Please let me know what y'all think, and I'll be back with another chapter hopefully soon.

Also, it's been over a year since I started this monster of a fic, and again I just wanted to thank everyone who has made this experience so much fun T_T Love y'all so much, for real.

'till next time :)

Chapter 62

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All eyes were on him, and Feliciano was positive he might just burst from the attention. It wasn't like there were all that many people in the courtroom, but he felt his skin crawl as though there were a million pairs of eyes piercing right through him. Tino was in front of him, pulling out a sheet of paper before clearing his throat.

"Feliciano," he said, a reassuring smile fixed in place, "I understand how nervous you must be, so I'll keep my questions short. If at any point you wish to stop, all you need to do is tell me."

Feliciano nodded in response, appreciating the gesture even if he knew how rehearsed this all was.

"Now, can you please explain what life was like with Lovino and Antonio?"

"Um, well, we got by." Feliciano tapped his finger on his leg, his back aching for how tense his shoulders were. "When *Nonno* died, things were really tough. But we had each other, and eventually it got better. I-I was happy."

"And recently you've been living with someone else, correct?"

Feliciano nodded, looking up to see Elizabeta smiling at him, "Yeah, Miss Elizabeta's helped us a lot too."

"Your honor, Ms. Héderváry took Feliciano in as a temporary guardian." Tino explained, even if it was likely that the judge already knew this. "She's been reliable, and was more than willing to offer Feliciano a place to go when the defendant was arrested on counts of child abuse."

Feliciano thought that was a nice jab on Tino's end, the lawyer masking his attacks so the other side wouldn't have a chance to defend themselves before they were already moving on.

And move on Tino did, "Feliciano, how would you describe your relationship with your father?"

"Um…" Feliciano glanced at his father, finding the man glaring harshly at him. He had to look away, his heart rate doubling in pace, "I-I mean, it's not great."

"If you would be a little more specific." Tino prodded gently.

Feliciano's throat constricted, making it difficult for him to form the necessary words to explain just how terrible his relationship with his father was. He had this horrible feeling in the pit of his stomach, like if he admitted too much, he would pay for it later.

“Are you going to be alright?” Judge Martin asked softly.

“Oh, um…” Feliciano bit at his bottom lip, nodding once. “Yes, thank you.”

Tino cleared his throat, reclaiming Feliciano’s attention, “If you don’t wish to answer-”

“No, it’s okay.” Feliciano said, breathing in deeply. His hands were shaking, so he balled them into fists before gritting out his response, “I-I hated living with him. He made me feel awful about myself, a-and he hurt me too.”

“How so?” Tino asked.

Instead of saying it out loud, Feliciano did something similar to what Lovino had done. He extended his arm out in front of him, squeezing his eyes shut before exposing his wrist, “Um, I-I have more on my arms, but he b-burned me.”

Even with his eyes closed, Feliciano could practically feel the stares that ran over his wrist. It set his skin on fire, his mind screaming at him to hide the mark, the shame of being made a victim for a second time. He wanted to hide away, the only thing keeping him in the room was the paralyzing fear of going back to the man who had put the mark there.

“Thank you, that’s enough.” Tino said, perhaps sensing how the teen had frozen.

Feliciano yanked his sleeve down before folding his hands in his lap. His teeth dug into his bottom lip, refusing to meet anybody’s eyes.

Tino paused for a few seconds, allowing Feliciano a moment to breathe before continuing on, “Your honor, I believe you have received all supporting evidence already, correct?”

“Yes, it has been received and reviewed.” she said shortly.

“Very well, then I do not wish to linger too long on the subject, if only for Feliciano’s sake.” Tino said, trying to save the teen unnecessary discomfort. “Feliciano, can you explain what your childhood was like?”

Feliciano nodded, “It was really hard. Our mom left when I-I was really little, so Lovi had to take care of me.”

“And your father?” Tino pushed.

“He didn’t care.” Feliciano breathed, staring at his hands in his lap. “He worked really late, and he came home drunk a l-lot. That was the worst because then he’d start yelling.”

“What would he yell about?”

“Everything.” Feliciano said, eyes slipping closed as he was pulled back into a time long gone. “Sometimes i-it was because I was in the way, and other times it was because we were being too loud. I-I mean, we could have been in bed, and he would still yell at us about something.”

“Your honor, Feliciano has recently been diagnosed with a panic disorder, and I have reason to believe this unpredictable home environment is the primary reason why.” Tino said, beginning to pace back and forth. “In fact, Feliciano has a few diagnoses that I am prepared to attribute entirely to the sickening nature of his upbringing. Quite honestly, I was disgusted to learn these details as every sane person should be. Therefore, I have a solution to propose when it comes to the matter of custody.”

Feliciano caught Antonio looking away sheepishly. This wasn’t part of the original plan, revealing that Elizabeta would ultimately be the one to take him in. But Antonio had revealed their hand too soon, and now they had to roll with it.

“Ms. Héderváry has been instrumental in Feliciano’s recovery, and has demonstrated sound judgement despite the uncertainty surrounding the situation.” Tino said, smiling when he addressed the teen once more. “Feliciano, how have you liked living with Ms. Héderváry?”

Feliciano smiled for the first time at the question, however shaky it was, “She’s been really supportive, and I-I really like living there. It’s quiet at her house, and I-I feel safe there.”

“Your honor, Ms. Héderváry has already filled out all the required paperwork to be considered for temporary guardianship, and per your permission, is prepared to foster Feliciano until such a time that he can provide for himself.” Tino began to wrap things up, offering his closing remarks. “I think for a teenager his age, it would be the most beneficial to keep Feliciano here and attending the same school. He shouldn’t be uprooted again, it wouldn’t be fair nor healthy. That is all, your honor.”

“Thank you Mr. Tino.” Judge Martin said, turning to the other lawyer. “Mr. Smith, you may cross-examine the witness.”

This was what Feliciano had been dreading, the harsh questioning from the other side. He was assured by Tino that the questions wouldn’t be too intense since it would look bad to (metaphorically) beat up a minor, but still Feliciano’s heart raced when Smith turned an appraising eye on him. The man smiled, and had Feliciano not been adept at recognizing what the sharpness in that smile meant, he would have said it was genuine.

“Feliciano — is it alright if I call you that?”

“Uh… sure.” Feliciano said uncertainly.

Smith nodded, “Great. I just have a few questions, we should be able to wrap this up shortly.”

Then get on with it, thought Feliciano, thinking this man sure liked the sound of his own voice.

“So, how has it been living on your own? Easy?” Smith asked lightly.

Feliciano shifted awkwardly where he sat, “Um, n-not really.”

“And why might that be?”

“Well…” Feliciano trailed off, picking harshly at his nails. “It was scary at first, but we got the hang of it. Lovi and Toni try really hard, and I-I was happy with them.”

“Yes, but you had trouble financially, correct?”

“I mean, yeah, but-”

“Were there times where you didn’t know if you would have your next meal?”

Feliciano bit at his lip, really not wanting to admit this out loud. Food had been scarce, true, but the reason he didn’t know if he would eat or not was because of his own poor relationship with food. Lovino always made sure he had something to eat regardless of his own wellbeing. The answer to the question was complicated, so he supposed he should give the whole story, “I-I mean, sometimes I wouldn’t eat, but-”

“And that, your honor, is exactly what I was afraid of.” Smith interrupted, shaking his head in apparent sadness. “In fact, Feliciano has been malnourished for quite some time now. His brother not only forged his paperwork, but neglected to properly feed his brother.”

“Wait, I-I wasn’t-”

“And… what was it you called her? Ms. Héderváry, I believe — how long have you known her?”

Feliciano didn’t like how quick the man was to change the subject, it made him uneasy, “Um, a couple weeks now.”

“And she is of no relation to you?”

“Well, no, but-”

“Your honor, I have concerns about placing a child in the care of someone who has no relation, familial or otherwise to him. For all we know, they could have found this woman on the street and paid her off to-”

“Wait, Miss Elizabeta was Lovi’s coworker!” Feliciano cut in, unable to stand by as this man tried to undermine Elizabeta’s kindness.

Smith nodded in apparent agreement, “Yes, a coworker at the bar where Mr. Valenti was fired from. If I do recall, it was due to him forging his paperwork and subsequently getting arrested for it.”

Feliciano snapped his mouth shut, realizing too late that he was giving the man ammunition. Still, it was getting increasingly difficult to hold his silence, the beginnings of anger settling uncomfortably in the pit of his stomach.

Apparently realizing that Feliciano wasn’t going to budge from his sudden silence, Smith continued, “Feliciano, can you please explain the relationship you had with Mr. Carriedo?”

Feliciano cocked his head to the side in confusion, thinking that this was a rather abrupt change in subject, “Toni?”

“Yes. You consider him family, correct?” Smith pushed.

Something about this was suspicious, but Feliciano nodded nonetheless, “I mean, yeah. We’ve known each other for a long t-time now.”

“And were you familiar with his parents?”

Feliciano shrugged, “Kind of.”

“And what do you remember of them?”

Feliciano chanced a glance at the couple he noticed from earlier, now certain that they were Antonio’s parents, “Not much. I-I know that they didn’t like Lovi very much.”

Smith nodded seriously, “And do you know why?”

The truth of the matter was, Feliciano really had no idea why Antonio’s parents had taken such a disliking to his brother. Antonio always brushed it off any time it was brought up, and Lovino had also been quick to change the subject when Feliciano had asked him years ago. He supposed it could be because they thought he was a delinquent — that’s what everyone thought about Lovino back then. It was his brother’s way of explaining away the injuries.

In the end, Feliciano decided on answering honestly, “I’m not sure.”

Lovino scoffed, “I can tell you why, they-”

“Mr. Valenti, if you would please refrain from interrupting, that would be most appreciated.” Judge Martin snapped.

Although he was clearly not happy about it, Lovino closed his mouth. He crossed his arms over his chest, glaring daggers at the back of Smith’s head.

Instead of continuing along the same thread, Smith once again shifted his questioning, “Feliciano, can you please explain what a day at school is like?”

Feliciano tried to figure out where Smith was going with it, hoping to find a way to put an end to whatever attack this man wanted to make before it happened. Unfortunately, he had no idea what Smith had planned, so was left with no option but to answer bluntly, “Um, well it’s a pretty normal high school, I guess.”

“And would you say that you enjoy your classes?”

“Um, yes?” Feliciano said, phrasing the statement more like a question.

“Is that so?” Smith muttered, more to himself than anyone else. “Would you like to explain then why your attendance in class has been, shall we say, less than exemplary?”

Of course that was where he was going. Feliciano really couldn't deny that he'd pretty much given up on class, either sleeping through it or skipping it entirely. He didn't know what his grades were like (he'd been a little preoccupied) but he was willing to bet they were abysmal. He bit nervously at his bottom lip, mumbling just loud enough to be heard, "Um, things have been really stressful lately. I had a hard time sleeping when I lived with my dad, so I would-"

"I was reading the complaint your art teacher wrote to the police," Smith said, immediately cutting Feliciano off at the mere mention of Cristiano. "He said that you experienced, to quote him, *'a violent mood swing.'* He went on to say that you seemed to suffer from some level of anxiety. Care to elaborate on that?"

Feliciano glared at the man, growing more irritated by the second. He didn't like that he kept getting cut off, not to mention that Smith continued to change the subject before he could explain himself, "I don't know what you want me to say, my dad's the reason I-I can't get my anxiety under control."

"Are we so certain of that?" Smith asked smugly. "I have been reliably informed that you've dealt with panic attacks your entire life."

"I-I mean, yeah, but-"

"So is it unreasonable to assume that the cause isn't any kind of environmental factor, but simply a genetic one?"

Feliciano dug his nails into his palm in his growing anger, "No, it's because-"

"In fact, I have school records from just a few years ago about how Feliciano had to spend the day in the nurse's office due to a panic attack." Smith walked over to the table behind him, picking up a document and waving it flippantly in the air before putting it back down. "Feliciano, can you tell me who you lived with two years ago when this report was filed?"

"My grandpa." Feliciano grit out, exchanging a quick glance with his brother. Lovino looked livid, a firm arm around his shoulders courtesy of Antonio probably the only thing that kept him seated.

Smith nodded, a contemplative finger tapping idly on his chin, "I see. Your honor, I believe that pinning the blame on my client for Feliciano's mental health issues are not only unfair, but completely false."

Feliciano heard Lovino scoff loudly, but his brother didn't say anything. Feliciano wondered how much longer his brother could hold his peace. Actually, Feliciano wondered how long *he* could keep from snapping at this greasy lawyer.

"Feliciano," Smith said, thoroughly snapping Feliciano back to the present. "Is it true that you attempted to run away while living with your brother and Mr. Carriedo?"

His glare slipped for just a moment, Feliciano having completely forgotten about that. He glanced at his brother and found that he looked equally as shocked that that would come up.

Feliciano turned back to the lawyer, ready to explain in full the situation that had led up to his decision to run, “Well, yes, I did run, but-”

“And there you have it, your honor.” Smith instantly cut him off. “Not only has the plaintiff demonstrated-”

Feliciano couldn’t believe he was being cut off again, “Wait, I-I wasn’t done-”

“-that he cannot be trusted to properly care for his brother, but the fact that Feliciano tried to escape his brother’s care should be a testament to his poor judgement. I believe that-”

“Hey, I was-”

“-it would be irresponsible to trust his judgement even now. Feliciano may say that he wishes to return to his brother, but should we trust-”

Feliciano kept trying to speak up, unable to get a word in edgewise. He was getting frustrated, and especially with the way this man talked about him like he was a child much younger than he was, “Um, excuse me-”

“-the word of someone who is unable to make decisions for themselves. Your honor-”

“P-please, can I-”

“-please carefully consider who you should listen to-”

Feliciano scowled, his hand curling up in a tight fist, “I-I’m trying to-”

“-an adult who has been steadily employed and financially stable-”

Something in his stomach twisted angrily, “I just-”

“-or a child-”

“Please-”

“-who has neither-”

“Can I-”

“-the experience nor mental capacity to choose what-”

Feliciano felt something snap, standing abruptly up as he shouted at the man, “STAI ZITTO!”

The room instantly went silent, the only sounds being Feliciano’s ragged breathing. From across the room, Feliciano thought he could see Lovino with a hand pushed over his mouth in shock, and even Antonio looked a stricken by the shout, but Feliciano could only focus on one thing:

“If you don’t want to let me talk, then I’ll just yell!” Feliciano spat at Smith, who was currently frozen to the spot. Feliciano thrust his arm out, pointing at where his father watched

curiously on, “He hurt me and Lovi everyday of our childhood, so excuse me for not wanting to go back!”

Smith turned to the judge, “Your honor-”

“Enough, let him speak.” Martin instantly responded, eyes fixed on the fuming teen.

Feliciano felt heartened at the support from the judge, but he was slowly losing himself to the sudden rage he felt, “People think they know what’s best for me, but they never ask what *I* want. Well, I-I just want all this to stop!”

“What exactly do you want to stop?” Judge Martin asked softly, a soft smile on her face.

“Everything.” Feliciano sniffled, the beginnings of tears in his eyes. He wiped them harshly away, “I-I’m tired. I’m *always* tired. People keep talking about me like I’m too traumatised to make my own decisions, I’m not a little kid anymore!”

Smith cleared his throat, as if to speak, but Feliciano cut him loudly off:

“And why are we pretending that I’m going back to my dad? Do we not have enough evidence? Was that video not enough? Are these scars not enough?” Feliciano ranted. “He’s the reason I-I panic so much, why I can’t control my anxiety, why I-I have this *fucking* stutter!”

Lovino started coughing, choking on his own breath at hearing his brother curse. Feliciano merely glanced at him before continuing in his tirade:

“I just can’t do it anymore! I’ve had enough, I-I’m not going to keep letting this happen to me! I never wanted any of this to happen, and I’m so frustrated!”

“Then what do you want to do next?” Judge Martin prodded gently.

Feliciano glared down at his hands, fighting the urge to pick at his nails as he said, “I want to go home. I want to go to school and make new friends. I-I want people to stop doing things behind my back, and… and I want to be normal and not panic over stupid things. I just want this all to stop — I don’t even care how anymore! I-I just… I just want...”

He couldn’t finish the statement, there were too many things stuck on the tip of his tongue that just wouldn’t come out. So instead, he sat, not saying a word as he viciously swiped the tears from his eyes.

The room was completely silent, but Feliciano couldn’t see anybody’s reactions. He kept his head down, choosing to shut down completely before he overwhelmed himself with everything he wanted that he could never have.

A pin could drop in the middle of that silent courtroom, and the sound would’ve been thunderous compared to the hush that had descended upon them. But it couldn’t last, and after another beat or two of horrible silence, Smith cleared his throat, “Your honor, if I may continue in my questioning-”

“The hell you will!” Lovino shouted, and when Feliciano glanced up he saw his brother trying to stand — only stopped by the combined efforts of both Tino and Antonio. “He’s completely overwhelmed, you stupid idiot!”

“While I would ask Mr. Valenti to please get ahold of himself, I have to agree with him, Mr. Smith.” Judge Martin said decisively, shooting a glare Lovino’s way when he continued in his irritated grumblings. Then she shifted her demeanor, lowering her voice to ask, “Do you wish to end the examination now?”

Feliciano knew the question was directed at him even if he didn’t meet the woman’s eyes. The rage he had felt so potently was slowly dissipating, leaving only resignation. He was tired, unable to hang onto his anger like his brother could, so he breathed in deeply before nodding, “Yes, please.”

Smith took a step forward, smiling sharply, “Feliciano, I would like to thank you for answering as honestly as you possibly could. We all just want what’s best-”

“Are we done here?” Feliciano snapped, surprising even himself with the vitriol in his voice.

Smith’s smile slipped from his face, glancing at the judge before saying, “Yes, I suppose we are.”

“Good.” Feliciano huffed, hopping down from the bench without waiting for permission. He was fed up with the questions, completely done with this hearing. He didn’t care for formalities anymore, and even if his heart still beat erratically from nerves he couldn’t completely supress, he was able to walk straight past his father with his head held high.

Elizabeta stood when Feliciano approached her, but he didn’t stop walking. He kept going, past every row of seats and straight to the door. He pushed it open, turning down the hallway before leaning against the wall.

Everything was silent around him, blessedly so. The marble floors were glossy, reflecting his own blank face back to him. He stared at the intricate pattern below, navy blue accented with a dull silver. Feliciano thought those colors went well together. He slid down the wall until he was sitting, gathering his knees in front of him.

The door to his immediate right swung open, revealing a very worried-looking Elizabeta. She spotted Feliciano almost immediately, breathing a heavy sigh of relief. She smiled sadly, walking over to the teen without a word.

Feliciano appreciated that she didn’t immediately ask questions — he thought that he was done with questions for the time being. Instead she leaned against the wall next to him, although she didn’t sit. Elizabeta looked straight ahead, remarking softly, “I know you probably don’t want to talk right now, but you did a really good job in there.”

“I guess.” Feliciano mumbled, resting his chin atop his knees. He turned his attention back to the marble flooring, trying to slow his rapid heartbeat by focusing on anything but what was happening in the room behind him. He was overwhelmed, but more than that, he was so, *so* tired.

Elizabeta sighed, glancing over her shoulder to where a muffled voice filtered through the doors, “What would you like to do?”

Feliciano shrugged, rubbing absently at his eyes. He supposed they should go back into the courtroom and face the noise, but he needed just another moment or two to gain his bearings, “Um, I want to go back in, but I-I need a minute.”

“Of course, dear. Just let me know when you’re ready.” Elizabeta said, making no move to walk away.

It took a few minutes, maybe two or three of total silence, but eventually Feliciano felt some of the tension drain out of his body. He’d only been pushed to the point of shouting a few times in his life, the effects of the rage he had felt while being questioned leaving him positively drained. He wondered how Lovino could stand to lose his temper so often… maybe that was why he was always so tired.

Feliciano pondered that for another few seconds before peering up to see Elizabeta waiting patiently for him. He heard somebody speaking in the courtroom, and he decided that he’d cooled off enough to handle going back in. He cleared his throat, immediately gaining Elizabeta’s attention, “Um, I think I’m okay now.”

Elizabeta smiled, offering one of her hands, “Alright, do you want to go back in?”

“Not really, but…” Feliciano accepted the hand, “I-I guess I probably should go back.”

Elizabeta hauled him up next to her, “Only if you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.” Feliciano said, taking a deep breath before he gestured to the door. “I want to see what happens.”

“Of course.” Elizabeta said, leading them both back towards the courtroom. “If you want to step out, just let me know.”

“Yeah.” Feliciano mumbled, the tension he had only so recently dispelled from his body returning full force when he re-entered the courtroom. Nobody spared them a second glance, probably because there was somebody new up at the stand.

Feliciano sat next to Elizabeta at their previous spot, trying not to glare too fixedly at the back of Smith’s head. The man had really pissed him off, and even now he felt something ugly twist in his chest at the mere sight of the greasy lawyer. But before he could get carried away in his heated staring, Smith stood, clearing his throat as he prepared to begin his examination.

The next witness had just finished giving their oath, sitting heavily down on the bench. It was the woman Feliciano noted from earlier, the one that he suspected was Antonio’s mother. She looked intensely ahead, very nearly glaring at a fixed point on the opposite wall.

The moment Smith was given the go-ahead to begin, he launched into his questions, “Mrs. Carriedo, thank you for joining us on such short notice.”

So it is Toni's mom, Feliciano thought, pleased that he had correctly deduced who the woman was.

"Would you please inform the court your reasons for being here?"

The woman rolled her eyes, "Isn't it obvious? I'm here to stop my son from bringing any more shame to our family."

Feliciano saw the way Antonio's shoulders scrunched up, the way he ducked his head in shame. Feliciano glared at the woman, hating that she could make the Spaniard act so meek.

"And how do you intend to do that?"

"By taking that child away from my idiot son." she said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Mrs. Carriedo, what are you saying?" Smith pushed, trying to force a direct answer out of her.

Feliciano's breath caught in his throat, making the connection the same time Elizabeta did. They both turned to each other in shock, Feliciano wincing when she suddenly grabbed his hand — an act of support for what was next:

"I'm here seeking physical custody of Feliciano Valenti."

Chapter End Notes

how do you like THAT FOR PLOT TWISTS

Hooolllly shit, I've had that one in my back pocket for literal months now lol. I hope I got some of you >:)

Anywho, Feli finally stood up for himself! Yay! He did so good up there, I'm so proud. It was pretty shitty of Smith to keep cutting Feli off... also trying to confuse him, but Feli was having none of it! Also, Lovi being supportive even if he shouldn't have been yelling in court lmao

Translation:
Stai Zitto -- shut up

I hope you guys liked this even if it was an illegal plot twist XD Love y'all, thanks for reading!

'Till next time!

Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"What the fuck, what the fuck, *what the fuck?"* Lovino whisper-yelled.

Tino was in a similar state of disbelief, hunched over the table as he scribbled down some notes. "My sentiments exactly."

"What do we do?" Lovino asked.

"We roll with it." Tino said.

Antonio was bouncing his foot restlessly under the table, nails digging into the palms of his hands in his anxiousness. "What does she mean by 'physical custody?'"

Tino shook his head, shifting his eyes briefly up to watch the court proceedings before returning to his notes. After a moment of silent contemplation, he answered. "Basically, she wants Feliciano to live with her. She doesn't get to make any decisions regarding his life, but she would be responsible to make sure he's provided for. Cristiano is probably seeking legal custody, which means he can take control of things like his education."

Lovino scowled. "That means the bastard has control of my brother's half of the will."

"At least until Feliciano turns eighteen, by which point I'm sure he'll coerce him into signing his inheritance away." Tino said with a weary sigh.

"This is bullshit!" Lovino said, just a little too loudly. The judge glanced very briefly at him, a scowl of her own in place. Lovino coughed into his arm, trying to play it off until she looked away. He lowered his voice, unable to mask the tremor there. "We have so much fucking evidence against that bastard."

"That's why Antonio's parents were brought in." Tino said, hand a blur as he wrote. "He knew he couldn't win after all that evidence, so he's trying to find a way around it."

"Will it work?" Antonio mumbled tiredly.

Tino stopped writing. He didn't look up, eyes fixed on his notes. "It might."

That wasn't what Lovino wanted to hear. He found Antonio's hand under the table, gripping it tight for both their sakes. His boyfriend looked sick to his stomach, and after a moment, Lovino found the reason why. Antonio's mother, *María,* was staring fixedly at her son with sharp, emerald eyes. Even as she robotically answered the questions from Smith, her gaze did not waver.

"Hey, Antonio." Lovino whispered just a bit desperately. "Look at me."

Antonio refused, locked in place by that horrid woman's eyes. "Lovi, this is really bad."

"It'll be okay." Lovino said, even if he was starting to have some doubts. He glanced over his shoulder to find Feliciano had finally returned. His poor brother's face was stricken, mirroring Antonio's almost perfectly. Lovino briefly thought of the way he'd blown up while being questioned, how well he'd done up there. It was a perfect display of all the hurt he's been through since Cristiano returned. Lovino had been so proud, so confident that it was the finishing blow. He wasn't anymore, and it stung.

It's not fair, Lovino thought bitterly. He fixed a glare on María, and briefly he noticed that Antonio had buried his head in his arms, both of which were crossed on the table. While not openly cruel, Antonio's parents were rigid in their beliefs. They'd warped Antonio's mind from a young age, they made him feel ashamed of himself for simply existing. It was unlikely they knew of Feliciano's preferences, and Lovino was utterly terrified that they would cause the same damage to his brother if they were given the chance.

Tino leaned over to Antonio, whispering in hushed tones. Every once in a while, the blond would pause to write something down before asking another question.

Lovino drummed his fingers against the table, the dull thudding swallowed by the large room. He tried to get out of his own head and focus on the court proceedings, but he was having a difficult time with it. From the way Tino's pen scribbled furiously on his notepad, to Antonio's labored breathing, Lovino was hyper aware of everything. He dug his fingernails sharply into the flesh of his palm to snap out of it, able to focus just long enough to listen to some of the questioning:

"Mrs. Carriedo, what was the reason you cut ties with your son?" Smith asked.

"My son is very confused." María said, a familiar accent coloring her words. "He was selfish to run away, but he made his decision."

"And did you disown him before or after he ran?" Smith pushed.

"After." María said with a firm nod. "We only cut ties after he made clear he never wanted to see us again."

"Is that true?" Tino whispered.

Antonio nodded, his voice hollow. "It was a bit more complicated than that, but yeah. I ran away, and then I found out they disowned me."

"Are you implying that your son may not be the most stable person to place a child with?" Smith pushed, and damn did he sound smug. Lovino wanted nothing more than wring that greasy man's neck.

María scoffed. "That boy can't even take care of himself. He'll probably be dead before he sees thirty."

“Fucking bitch.” Lovino growled under his breath. He had to force his gaze away or else he’d lose control, instead he turned his eyes to Antonio. His boyfriend still had his head buried in his arms, and although Lovino couldn’t see his face properly, he could hear his ragged breathing. It wasn’t a look that suited Antonio, this horrible meekness he exhibited. Lovino threw an arm over his shoulders and leaned in close.”Hey, talk to me. What’s wrong?”

Antonio laughed sardonically, his words muffled by his arms. “You mean besides my mother tearing me to shreds?”

“It’s alright, we’ll get our chance against her.” Lovino said, glancing at Tino for confirmation. The lawyer only shot him an unenthusiastic smile back before returning to his notes. It wasn’t a heartening exchange.

“And Feliciano?” Smith’s voice cut in. “What relation do you have with the boy?”

“I watched him grow up.” María said, her graying hair bobbing in that high bun as she nodded. “He was always such a sweet little thing, and I’m more than happy to welcome him into my home.”

Bullshit, that woman never cared for Feliciano. Actually, Lovino doubted that she’d shared even three conversations with his brother, let alone ‘watch him grow up.’ Lovino tugged on Tino’s shirt to steal his attention away. “Hey, that’s wrong. She doesn’t know a thing about my brother.”

Tino looked intrigued, scribbling something down on his notepad without a word.

“Thank you, Mrs. Carriedo. As a mother, I can tell that you only want what’s best for Feliciano.” Smith finished smoothly, flashing a small smile to the judge.

Martin only waved a hand dismissively in the air, gesturing for Smith to take his seat. She appraised María shortly, really only a fleeting glance, before she cleared her throat. “Mr. Tino, you may cross-examine the witness.”

Tino scrambled to gather his notes, all of them handwritten. He was going in fairly blind on this encounter, and Lovino prayed that he had some divine skill of bullshit in his arsenal.

The small lawyer smoothed the front of his suit and ran a hand through his hair. It might have been a nervous gesture, but it was over with so quickly that Lovino couldn’t be sure. Tino was good at hiding his emotions like that, it was his job, after all. He took in a deep breath, and squared his shoulders before launching into his questions. “Mrs. Carriedo, could you please describe the events that led up to Antonio’s departure from your household?”

María shrugged rather flippantly. “He said that he couldn’t stand living with us anymore, then he ran. He stole our car once before that, so he’d tried to run away more than once.”

Wrong, Lovino thought. Antonio also made a little noise of dissent in the back of his throat, but he still didn’t look up. The night Antonio took the car was to help both Feliciano and Lovino himself escape to their grandfather’s farm. It wasn’t an attempt to run away at all, and the woman knew that damn well.

“And what do you think drove him away?” Tino asked, and it seemed like he was getting on a roll. “Was it something you might have done or said?”

For the first time, María had some semblance of unease in her face. She chewed absently on her burgundy lips, her long, red nails cracking shrilly against the table top. “He never agreed with our lifestyle, he was ungrateful. We confronted him about his horrible attitude, and he blew up. Antonio’s always been such an angry child.”

Wrong again. Lovino wrung his hands viciously together, livid on Antonio’s behalf. His ‘horrible attitude’ was just a euphemism María used. What she was really referring to was his depression. Antonio had been at rock bottom and asked for help, and received nothing but blame and disgust from his family. Lovino mentally urged Tino to spring on this point, to expose this woman for her lies.

“And you were aware of his mental health?” Tino asked, and it was like he was answering Lovino’s prayers. Of course Tino had a plan, he was a clever one.

“Marginally.” María answered, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “He hid it from us well.”

“Yet it took nearly half a year for him to run away after his suicide attempt.” Tino said coldly, and, oh, he sounded *mad.* “You’re trying to tell me, and this court, that you were unaware of your own son’s mental health after he’d been hospitalized?”

“That’s not what I said.” María answered, the deep lines in her aging face cinching together as she scowled. “He convinced us he was better.”

“Then for six months, you allowed your relationship with Antonio to deteriorate so far that he felt his only option was to run away.” Tino dug in, turning to the judge. “Your honor, is this really a person you would trust to build and maintain a healthy relationship with a teenager such as Feliciano?”

Judge Martin quirked an eyebrow up, intrigued. “Mrs. Carriedo, is this true?”

María was quick to backtrack. “We were aware, that’s not what I meant. I was only saying that he wouldn’t talk to us. We tried to help, but he didn’t want it.”

“So help me God, I’m going to kill her.” Lovino growled, but any other outbursts were halted when he heard something. He glanced to his side, to the source of the sound, and observed the way Antonio’s shoulders hitched up. A strange, choppy sound spilled from his lips, and after a moment, Lovino realized he was *laughing.* “What the hell? What’s so funny?”

For the first time since María took the stand, Antonio looked up. His eyes were red, but he wore a wide smile. The effect of that combination made him look hysterical. “Sorry, it’s not really that funny. I just forgot how toxic she is.”

“Why are you laughing?” Lovino asked, alarmed when Antonio only laughed harder. They were starting to receive weird looks, the judge not being the least of those. “Seriously, we’re going to get kicked out!”

“It’s just so *stupid!”* Antonio said, probably louder than he meant. Tino stopped to stare as well, the bewildered look on the lawyer’s face only served to feed Antonio’s amusement. He started laughing harder.

“Mr. Carriedo, would you like to inform us what you find so amusing?” Judge Martin asked, sharp eyes staring down from her position on the bench.

If Antonio was bothered by the tone, he didn’t show it. No, he almost seemed emboldened by it. “Sorry, I’m just trying to figure out why I used to be so scared of her. She’s not very scary at all.”

Was he having a psychotic break? Lovino thought he might be, and especially with the way he kept laughing even as tears ran down his cheeks. Lovino tugged on his sleeve, trying to get him to stop.

But he refused, instead he carried on like a madman. “I mean, she was never home. Neither was my dad, they probably forgot I existed!”

And now he sounded angry. At the stand, María sat with her mouth gaping like a fish. She shook her head, brow furrowed in annoyance. “If you really must know, we were away on church business. We offered to let Antonio travel with us, but he refused every time.”

“Yeah, because then I’d have to be stuck with you the entire time!” Antonio shouted, his chair scraping against the floor as he abruptly stood. “I waited for you two to leave, I *wanted* you two to leave! I may have been miserable, but I was the happiest when you left for months at a time!”

“Antonio, sit down!” Lovino whisper-shouted. The situation was getting dangerous for more than one reason — security was beginning to creep towards them. All it took was one command from the judge, and Antonio would be escorted straight out of the building.

“Me and Lovi fought, sure, but at least he didn’t abandon me!” Antonio’s voice cracked at the end, his hands curled into fists. “I didn’t run away, you made it impossible to live there! It would have killed me to stay there, and you know it!”

Lovino glanced fearfully at the judge, praying she wasn’t too angry with the outburst. He’d already pushed her buttons one too many times that day, and getting kicked out was definitely not on the list of things Lovino wanted to happen today.

Surprisingly, Judge Martin didn’t look upset at all. Actually, she looked rather… *contemplative?* Was she seriously considering what Antonio had to say? That seemed odd, Lovino thought judges looked down on these kinds of outbursts. Maybe this would work in their favor.

Antonio was breathing heavily, his face set into a deep frown. All traces of resignation were gone, it was clear he was ready to fight. If only they weren’t in such a formal setting, Lovino would encourage him to go off on the woman.

“Mr. Carriedo, please sit down.” Judge Martin said calmly. She wrote something down, nodding to herself in thought.

Lovino tugged once again on Antonio’s jacket sleeve. “C’mon, you can send her an angry letter later.”

With a huff, Antonio sat heavily down. He clearly wasn’t happy about it, his arms crossed harshly over his chest. He glared straight ahead at his mother, and strangely enough, it was now *María* who averted her eyes.

There was a moment of tense silence, but then Tino must have remembered that he had every right to continue on. He cleared his throat, smoothing out the front of his suit before directing his attention back to María. “Mrs. Carriedo, I only have a few more questions. First, can you please tell me how old Feliciano is.”

María froze for just an instant, obviously thrown by the question. She tapped one of her nails in thought, scanning the crowd before she found the teen in question. It took her perhaps a moment too long to answer, but she did offer a response. “He’s sixteen.”

“Correct.” Tino remarked softly, and was that a smile on his face? “And do you happen to know what color his eyes are?”

María glanced at Lovino, locking their eyes for a moment before answering. “Green, just like his brother.”

Nevermind the fact that Lovino’s eyes were more hazel than green, the woman was still dead wrong. Feliciano had amber eyes, not like Lovino, but like Cristiano. Lovino was almost amused.

Tino shook his head. “Can you please tell the court when his birthday is?”

“March.” María said, that finger she tapped with increasing its tempo. Lovino was quickly realizing that it was a nervous gesture.

Tino nodded. “Which day in March?”

María scoffed, eyes finding the ceiling as she thought. It took her a minute or so, and her eyes didn’t leave the ceiling when she answered. “Twenty-third.”

Wrong, Lovino smirked.

Tino also seemed pleased, but he masked it with a serious nod. “Incorrect. Mrs. Carriedo, why exactly do you want to take Feliciano in? I’m not convinced you know a single thing about him, yet you still agreed to come to court. Is there something you’d like to share?”

“Is it really so strange that I’m not perfectly aware of every detail?” María asked in annoyance. “Honestly, it’s been years since I’ve seen the boy.”

“Yet you feel perfectly capable of providing him a home?” Tino asked. “How can you possibly support someone when you know nothing about them?”

“And what about your proposed guardian?” María asked with an annoyed roll of the eyes. “She’s known him for what, two weeks? I’ve known Feliciano since he was barely old enough to walk.”

“Your honor, I think the witness has proved for herself that she knows next to nothing about Feliciano.” Tino said, staring pointedly at María. “Furthermore, I believe she repeatedly neglected her own son to the point where he felt it necessary to run away. Feliciano has revealed exactly who he’s more comfortable living with, and I urge you to please consider his wishes if nobody else’s. That is all.”

“Very well, thank you Mr. Tino.” Judge Martin said, gesturing for María to vacate the bench.

She did after sending a heated glare to Antonio, and Lovino was proud to note that his boyfriend sent one right back. Gone was the uncharacteristic meekness from Antonio, he was back to his confident, passionate self.

“Mr. Smith, am I correct to say that you have no more witnesses to call?” Judge Martin asked.

“Yes, your honor.” Smith said.

Lovino turned, confused. Was Cristiano not planning to testify? After everything, Lovino expected the man to put up a fight, but he seemed quite content to sit there and watch everything unfold. He was leaning back against his chair, arms crossed with a steely expression. Lovino shuddered, and despite his insistence on not letting the man get to him, he was still unnerved by the look.

“Why isn’t he testifying?” Lovino whispered, more to himself than anybody.

Tino heard him, whispering back. “There’s too much evidence against him, he doesn’t want to risk a misstep.”

“Very well.” Judge Martin said, arranging her papers neatly in front of her. She looked straight ahead, pulling her long, blond braid to rest over her shoulder. Her deep, ocean eyes revealed nothing of what she was thinking, her lips set in a straight line. “I will be making my decision momentarily, but first I need to ask a few questions.”

Lovino was shocked, unable to believe the verdict would come so soon. He didn’t know much about legal affairs, but he thought it was supposed to take longer than this.

“Lovino Valenti.” Judge Martin said, her voice echoing in the large room.

Lovino audibly gulped, standing on shaky legs. His fingers felt numb, like all the blood in his veins had turned to ice. He wondered if his voice would shake as well. “Yes, you honor.” Oh yeah, it definitely shook.

“I have heard your case, and I have to say, I’m disappointed.” she said curtly.

Lovino could have crumbled for how fast his stomach dropped. He almost did, fighting to keep his chin steady so his voice wouldn’t shake too terribly. “Yes, your honor.”

“I don’t deny that you’ve done your best to provide for your brother, but you have to understand the position I’m in here.” Martin said, and if Lovino listened hard enough, he might have heard something akin to sympathy in her voice. “You’re only nineteen years old, unemployed, and this entire hearing, you’ve demonstrated difficulty handling your temper. Why should I even consider your judgement in this situation?”

It was like a knife to the gut, and Lovino could only stand frozen to the spot. He absently looked over to the side, to where his father was sitting. The man looked smug, like this was exactly what he wanted. God, it made Lovino’s blood boil. He looked back to the judge, hardening his expression and forcing his voice to stay steady. “Because I care about my brother. I know I messed up, but he’s all I have left. I can’t let him slip away, it would kill me.”

Judge Martin nodded seriously, tapping her nails on the table top. She looked unsure, like she was still considering everything. “You knew when you arrived today that there was no way for you to win, correct?”

“Yes, your honor.” Lovino said hollowly.

“So you brought Ms. Héderváry to act as a guardian by proxy?”

Lovino nodded. “Yes.”

Judge Martin sighed heavily, showing the most emotion since the beginning of the trial. She rubbed her eyes under her glasses, displacing the spectacles before she could adjust them again. “You’re not making my job easy, I hope you know that, Mr. Valenti.”

“Sorry.” Lovino mumbled.

Martin shuffled through a few of her notes, clicking her pen a few times as she thought. There was hesitance etched into her very expression. “And how long personally have you known Ms. Héderváry?”

“Since my grandfather died.” Lovino said, a wave of sudden sadness washing over him. So many of these issues wouldn’t exist if the old man didn’t leave them. It stung worse than Lovino would like to admit, but this wasn’t the time to linger on it. “So around seven months now.”

“And how long has she known Feliciano?”

“Almost a month.” Lovino said. In reality, it was probably like three weeks or so, but he thought he could exaggerate the number to make it sound a little better.

“You understand my hesitance placing your brother with someone he’s only met so recently, correct?” Judge Martin said. “Mrs. Carriedo claims to have known since childhood, and she, unlike Ms. Héderváry, has experience with raising a teenager.”

Lovino had the strong urge to roll his eyes, but held off in an attempt to stay professional. “Yeah, and look how well that ended. With all due respect, I don’t want Feliciano to deal with

someone that hurt my boyfriend so badly that he ran away. I was there, too, I saw how they treated him."

Judge Martin nodded seriously, twisting her lips this way and that as she thought. She turned to Cristiano, addressing the man shortly. "Mr. Valenti, if I'm being quite honest, I'm not sure if I trust your judgement, either."

Cristiano looked annoyed, but nodded nonetheless.

"You've shown a complete disregard for the health of both your sons, and the video that was submitted to me only further incriminates you. Why should I trust your judgement?"

"Because I'm the only adult in the room." Cristiano said smoothly, uncrossing his arms to look less standoffish. "Your honor, remember I'm not seeking physical custody. I don't want my son to live with me, I only want him out of the hands of these two," here he gestured to Lovino and Antonio. "I've been seeking help for my issues, and have been making improvements. I can make sound judgement, and I think I've proven that by relinquishing custody to María."

"Noted." Martin muttered, marking something down in her notes. She shook her head to herself, and Lovino thought he could hear her muttering under her breath.

There was nothing to do but wait, and Lovino thought it may kill him. His chest was so unbearably tight, and absently he realized he was holding his breath. He couldn't bear to look back to his little brother right now, Lovino was hopelessly stuck facing forward. He didn't know if he dared to hope right now, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't send a silent prayer upwards.

"Very well, I have made my decision." Judge Martin said, her voice weary, but sure.

Lovino's heart stuttered in his chest, and he felt more than saw the way Antonio stood next to him. Their hands locked, a necessary precaution for the verdict to come.

"In light of the special circumstances surrounding this case, I have made careful considerations involving my decision." she said, and her words just seemed to drag on and on. "Not least of these considerations are the actions of the plaintiff, defendant, and the wishes of the child."

"C'mon, get on with it." Lovino mumbled, receiving a light squeeze on his hand courtesy of Antonio.

"Given that Feliciano is sixteen years old, I believe he has sound enough judgement to decide things for himself."

Lovino's jaw dropped the same time his heart leapt in his chest. He shook himself out of it, turning to find his brother was equally shocked. Feliciano looked like a deer caught in headlights, eyes blown wide open, and posture completely rigid. After being thrown around so much in the last couple of months, to hear that he may have a say in the outcome of this case must have been a novel thing indeed.

“Feliciano, if you would.” Judge Martin said, beckoning the teen to the front with a soft smile.

Feliciano did after a moment of brief hesitance, leaving the relative safety of Elizabeta’s side and making his way slowly to the front. He almost shrunk away at all the attention, but Lovino was pleased to note that he walked with his shoulders squared and head high.

Martin addressed Feliciano softly when he finally stopped below her bench. “I’ve been through many cases such as these, and I don’t do this lightly. I find both parties to have their flaws, some more than others. I want you to make a decision, and I will heavily consider it.”

“I get to decide?” Feliciano nearly whispered, but his voice carried over the room. He sounded bewildered, like he never thought he’d ever get to choose. “It’s up to me?”

He should never feel so surprised that he would get to speak up for himself. It was like he was used to being just a piece of a puzzle, like a prize to be won. If Lovino had known Feliciano felt so helpless in his own life, he would have addressed it sooner.

“Mostly.” Judge Martin said with a warm smile. The woman only seemed warm towards Feliciano. “Like I said, I will heavily consider whatever you choose.”

“Oh.” Feliciano said, his eyes finding Lovino’s. He looked equal parts exhausted and overjoyed, eyes heavy and dark underneath, but still bright despite it all.

Lovino smiled in encouragement, trying to keep his brother’s eyes fixed on him. He couldn’t see what kind of face Cristiano was making, but it was probably fierce enough to make both brothers cringe away.

Feliciano smiled back, looking up to the judge with something like wonderment in his eyes. “Um, I’d like to live with Miss Elizabeta, please.”

Judge Martin smiled, turning over the response in her head for a moment or two before addressing the teen once more. “I’m surprised you didn’t ask to stay with your brother.”

Feliciano shrugged, sending an apologetic look Lovino’s way when he said, “I-I didn’t think you’d say ‘yes’ if I asked to be with Lovi. Besides, I feel safe with Miss Elizabeta.”

“A wise decision on your end.” Judge Martin remarked. She nodded to herself, only considering things for a moment more. Lovino swore he blacked out for a second or even more when Martin announced, “Then it’s decided. Feliciano has spoken, and I trust his judgement. Ms. Héderváry has been granted guardianship until such a time where Feliciano can provide for himself. Case dismissed.”

The gavel hit wood, sealing the decision in stone. It was over.

Chapter End Notes

Despite the last line, it's not really over. Well, mostly over, there's some loose ends to tie up, but yay! End of the trial arc!!!

Oooooh my gosh guys, I'm so sorry I left this thing for like four months or something. I really don't have much of an excuse besides writer's block and burnout, I'm sorryyyyy T_T

BUT, like I said, I refuse to let this thing be unfinished. I will complete this story if it freaking kills me XD

Alrighty, like I said, this is kind of the ending, kind of not. A few more things are still in motion that need to be addressed, and I hope to bring this behemoth fic to a satisfying conclusion. Thank you all for sticking with me for so long, it's been a wild journey :)

Love you guys so much, thanks!!!

'till next time :)))

Chapter 64

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Feliciano was dreaming. He had to be. There was nothing else to describe this floaty, euphoric sensation that settled over him like a warm blanket. His eyes were burning for how wide he kept them open, shock and wonder alike making him unable to so much as breathe.

He hadn't felt the arm snake around his shoulders, not right away. The sound of gavel on wood kept echoing in his mind. It was all over, he didn't have to live with the fear that he'd be dragged away from the only people in his life that mattered anymore. It was overwhelming, but for once not in a bad way.

The arm around his shoulders began tugging, and belatedly Feliciano realized he should react. He looked up to see Elizabeta smiling straight ahead, clearly ecstatic, but able to hold onto a professional demeanor. She was leading him towards his brother, but Feliciano felt compelled to do something first.

He stopped walking, forcing the woman to stop as well. Feliciano twisted around, just enough to lock eyes with Judge Martin, and smiled. "Thank you."

Judge Martin froze, halfway through putting a stack of documents away, blue eyes wide behind her thin spectacles. Maybe she'd never been thanked before, or perhaps she hadn't expected to be addressed again, but she shook out of it quickly. Martin smiled back, her expression warm despite her icy personality. "You're welcome. I wish you the best."

Feliciano nodded, turning back to approach his brother. He wanted to glance at his father, to see with his own eyes the man crumble in defeat, but Elizabeta used her body as a shield. Feliciano tried to twist to get a glimpse, but Elizabeta was quick to distract him.

"Come on, dear, your brother's dying to talk to you!" she said just a bit too cheerfully.

Feliciano was a bit frustrated, but he completed the short journey to his brother without complaint.

Indeed, it did look as though Lovino was dying to say something. He bounced on the balls of his feet, his smiling face almost an oddity given his typical countenance. Antonio looked just as excited, a few tears gathered in the corner of his eyes.

The moment Feliciano was within grabbing distance, Lovino pulled him into a crushing hug. He rested his chin on the younger's shoulder, whispering, "I'm so proud of you."

Feliciano teared up at the comment, hugging back just as tight. "I thought you'd be upset."

Lovino scoffed, pushing his brother back to look at him. "What, because you chose Elizabeta?"

Feliciano nodded.

“Do you really think you could hurt my feelings that easily?” Lovino said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly. “Seriously, this was the plan all along.”

That was true, Feliciano supposed. Still, a part of him felt a bit bad for choosing a woman he met not a month ago over his own flesh and blood. But the guilt was short-lived, because next it was Antonio to scoop him up in a tight hug.

“You did great!” Antonio said. “You really stuck it to that stupid lawyer.”

Feliciano laughed sheepishly. “Yeah, I didn’t mean to blow up like that, sorry.”

“I’d give you shit for it, but we both know where you learned that language.” Lovino mumbled, like he was embarrassed to admit it.

Elizabeta rolled her eyes, but she was quick to take control. “I hate to break this little party up, but the sooner we’re out of here, the better I think we’ll feel.”

She said it with a level of urgency that sprung the small party into action. Briefly, Feliciano wondered why she was so adamant in getting him away from the courtroom. He craned his neck, watching Tino rifle through some documents. The lawyer beckoned Lovino over, who did so with an apologetic smile to his brother.

“I’ll be right back.” Lovino said.

Feliciano attempted to watch him go, sensing that something was off, when Elizabeta distracted him yet again, “What do you say we go visit Gilbert and his brother? I’m sure they’re both anxious to know what happened.”

Forcing his gaze away from where his brother was entering a hushed conversation with Tino, Feliciano met Elizabeta’s soft gaze and nodded, “Yeah, that sounds nice. Is Lovi coming, too?”

Antonio caught up with them, nodding pleasantly, “We’ll both meet you there, just have to tie things up here first.”

“Oh, okay.” Feliciano said, disappointed. But he wasn’t allowed to linger on the feeling as Elizabeta was pulling him quickly out of the courtroom and beyond. Outside the sun was still shining, although it sat lower in the sky now. It’d only been a few hours, but to Feliciano the proceedings felt like they had taken days.

“How are you feeling?” Elizabeta asked suddenly, her demeanor less frenzied now that they were outside.

Feliciano shrugged, glancing curiously behind him, “Okay, but what’s Lovi doing?”

Elizbeta’s smile was tight, “Oh, just something that should have been done years ago.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.” Feliciano pouted.

“I’m sorry.” Elizabeta said earnestly as she pulled her car keys. “I think it’s better for your brother to explain.”

Just then there was a small commotion at the entrance of the courthouse. A man was being led in handcuffs from the building, his face positively smoldering. It took a moment to recognize him from this distance, but with a small gasp Feliciano realized it was his father being pushed into the police car.

He whipped his head to Elizabeta who was smiling pleasantly at the scene.

“What-”

“Like I said,” Elizabeta unlocked her car door, motioning for the teen to follow suit, “Lovino will explain.”

Feliciano nodded, pulling the door open and getting inside the car. He watched in fascination as the man who tormented most of his young life was driven away in cuffs.

It was everything he could have possibly dreamed of.

“I’ll be right back.” Lovino said with an apologetic smile, watching as Elizabeta ushered his little brother away. He felt a bit bad, but he promised to himself that he’d explain everything later. It was much more important that Feliciano wasn’t present for this next part.

“Okay, I have everything. Are you ready?” Tino asked.

Lovino nodded, a confident smile on his face, “I’ve been ready for this day for my entire fucking life.”

Tino nodded, walking quickly to meet Judge Martin, who was signing a few documents at her bench.

In the meantime, Lovino made his way over to Cristiano. He felt Antonio follow in his wake, just close enough to be a silent body of support. The man was still sitting, fixing Lovino with an annoyed little scowl.

“Are you happy now?” Cristiano grumbled.

Lovino smiled, crossing his arms smugly over his chest, “Extremely.”

Cristiano sighed, a scowl darkening his expression, “If you think you’ve gotten rid of me, then you’re terribly mistaken.”

Lovino chuckled, “I kind of figured you had some kind of backhanded plan if the legal way didn’t work.”

“Oh?” Cristiano’s face morphed from annoyed to condescending. “I didn’t think foresight was your strong suit.”

“It’s not.” Lovino replied, his smile widening. “Too bad for you, I have a kickass lawyer who was able to dig up some dirt.”

Cristiano stood, taking a commanding step forward, “Are you trying to intimidate me?”

Lovino very nearly retreated, unable to help the conditioned reaction, but Antonio placed a steadying hand on the small of his back. It grounded him, made him feel more confident. Lovino clenched his hands into fists, the smile slipping from his face, “It would have been easier if you just stayed the hell out of our lives.”

“And why’s that?” Cristiano muttered darkly.

“Because I was able to find out a few things.” Lovino nearly growled this time. “Like the mysterious circumstances surrounding our mother’s death.”

The first traces of unease began to show on the larger man’s face, “Just what in the hell are you implying?”

“You couldn’t stand the fact that she was going to leave your ass, could you?” Lovino said, just above a whisper. “You tried to stop her by fucking slashing the tires. You’re the reason she died.”

“She didn’t love you.” Cristiano said viciously. “She was going to leave you, too.”

“Oh, I’m aware. I have nothing pleasant to say about her either.” Lovino brushed off his father’s attempt to distract him. “But you just couldn’t leave well enough alone.”

Behind them, an officer approached. Cristiano looked surprised before realization dawned on him. He glared harshly at his son, snarling, “You don’t have any evidence.”

“He doesn’t, but I do!” Tino chirped pleasantly, materializing from behind the officer with a small stack of papers. “I found the original police report as well as some strange mistakes made on it. I haven’t pulled the bank statements yet, but I think there may have been a bribe involved!”

Lovino nearly burst into laughter at Cristiano’s flabbergasted face, and especially with how satisfied Tino looked in his own work.

“You won’t find anything.” Cristiano said, glaring even as the officer put him in handcuffs. “You’ll regret this, you and your brother.”

Lovino glared right back, “Just admit it, you were outsmarted by your own son. God, you must feel fucking stupid.”

The last thing Lovino saw of his father was the man’s enraged expression as he was led away. He was taken straight out of the courtroom with no fanfare. It was everything the man deserved, to be taken away and detained for the rest of his miserable life. Lovino would personally ensure it.

“You’re sure he’s guilty?” Antonio asked apprehensively.

Tino nodded, some of that chipper attitude fading away, “I interviewed a few people already, I’m positive he’s guilty.”

“Good.” Lovino slumped where he stood, pushing a shaky hand through his hair. Despite his earlier bravado, it had taken a lot to face that man down.

Antonio began leading them out, Lovino quite content to just follow where the gentle pressure on his back led him. But then, directly to their right, a familiar figure cleared her throat.

“Antonio.” María said emotionlessly.

Behind him, Lovino could feel his boyfriend stiffen.

“Mamá.” Antonio greeted shortly.

María crossed her arms expectantly, as if waiting for her son to say something. When all Antonio did was stare straight ahead, she scoffed, “All these years and you have nothing to say to me?”

Antonio shrugged, “I said everything I needed to during the hearing.”

“I was expecting an apology.” María muttered.

Antonio simply rolled his eyes, ushering Lovino forward, “Me too.”

They walked right past her, something Lovino was extremely proud of Antonio for. That woman had been a constant cloud over his boyfriend’s head, but it seemed like he was finally able to dispel her presence from his life.

“I thought you were going to yell at her.” Lovino whispered.

“What would that accomplish?” Antonio whispered back. “She disowned me, she’s as good as a stranger to me now.”

With those final words, Antonio and Lovino pushed their way outside of the courtroom. Tino waved to them, making his way deeper into the building to tie some things up. Outside the sun shone, marking the start of a wonderful new future. Lovino breathed in the feeling of freedom, finding Antonio’s hand as they took a step forward towards a new chapter.

Chapter End Notes

GUESS WHO'S MOTHERFUCKIN BACK BITCHES

Wow I can't believe I let a cliffhanger go on for 2 years. My bad yo

Anyway, hope you liked it! I have a few more chapters to tie this one up and then i may post a oneshot or two that i've written in the meantime in relations to this story (most of it prequel stuff)!

Let me know what yall think or if anyone is still actually reading this :)

Love yall!

'till next time!

Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“I think the green goes over there.”

“No, I-I already tried that.”

“Are you sure? Here, let me-”

“Wait, I think it goes-”

“No, don’t turn it to the right!”

“Sorry!” Feliciano smiled, turning a multi-colored cube over in his hands.

“Try turning it left!” Peter said impatiently, sitting next to Feliciano on the couch. He kept offering what he thought were helpful instructions, but in reality he was just confusing both of them.

Feliciano hummed thoughtfully, turning the puzzle this way and that. He’d been trying to solve the mystery of these six colors for five months, and he was no closer to resolving it now than when he received it.

“Are you sure you know your lefts and rights?” Peter asked, scowling when the cube was turned (what he perceived as) the wrong way.

Feliciano chuckled, “No, maybe you could show me.”

Peter began dutifully explaining the difference between left and right, taking the cube in his hands to demonstrate. Elizabeta walked in during the in-depth explanation, smiling good-naturedly at the two on her couch.

“So sorry to interrupt, but could I steal you away, Feli?” Elizabeta asked.

“Sure,” Feliciano said, following the woman into the kitchen. He glanced at Peter, seeing how the boy had already undid all their progress on the puzzle. He smiled fondly.

“I’m sorry to spoil the fun,” Elizabeta said, bustling her way to the bubbling pot on the stove. “It’s not often I cook for this many people, I’m afraid I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

Feliciano dismissed her concerns at once, “I don’t mind. Helping out is the least I can do.”

“I appreciate it, dear.” Elizabeta smiled warmly, gesturing to the counter. There was a cutting board and knife already set out. “If you could cut up the veggies, that would be such a huge help.”

Feliciano nodded, instantly setting to work on an onion. He listened to Elizabeta hum as she worked, dropping some potatoes to the boiling water. Outside, the sun was beginning to dip, the hazy oranges peeking in through the curtained windows.

“Are you excited?” Elizabeta asked suddenly and probably a bit louder than she intended.

Feliciano jumped but recovered quickly. He thought about the question for only a moment before smiling, “Yeah, although Lovi might not be.” He chuckled softly as he finished chopping the first onion. “He sounded like he wanted to throw up.”

“I thought he’d be ecstatic!” Elizabeta said with some surprise.

“Oh, he is.” Feliciano huffed to himself. “Not that he’d admit it.”

“They flew back in a couple days ago, right?” Elizabeta asked.

“Yeah,” Feliciano responded. His brother and Antonio had been making frequent trips to Italy to try and figure out exactly what their inheritance entailed. Since he was still in school, Feliciano had yet to take a trip home. He thought about that, glancing at Elizabeta briefly before saying, “If it’s alright, I’d like to go back, too. I-I want to visit grandpa.”

He tried not to stutter over his words, but sometimes he couldn’t help it. It tended to give away his nerves. Elizabeta turned to look at the teen for a moment, perhaps to make sure he was alright. On reflection, Feliciano realized he’d taken on a rather forlorn tone.

“It’s okay if not.” Feliciano backtracked quickly. “I-I mean, I know my grades aren’t great, and I have class this summer, but I think it would be really good for me to go back just to see how things are going, and maybe Lovi could come too, and I-I promise I’ll do all my homework on time and-”

“Feli, take a breath.” Elizabeta interjected softly.

Feliciano immediately pulled in a lungful of air, realizing he’d been rambling a bit. Also that his heart was beating too quickly. And his hands had gone clammy. And the scar on his wrist was beginning to burn with phantom pain. Elizabeta had developed a keen sense for when he was about to overthink himself into a panic.

Once she was positive he was no longer working himself up, she said, “Of course we can take a trip, we’ll have plenty of time around your classes.”

With a heavy sigh of relief, Feliciano breathed, “Thank you.”

She smiled, as if to say *of course.* Then she turned back to her cooking.

Feliciano indulged himself with a fleeting moment of guilt. This was a woman who had taken him in on her own dime, offering a home and a safe place to heal. She had helped him recover through some pretty brutal panic attacks, and talked him through more than one dissociation spell. She’d taken him to therapy regularly, offered him comfort, been the first positive adult role model he’s ever had. She deserved so much more than a few words of thanks. She deserved more than he could ever give.

Just as his mood was in danger of plummeting, the door burst open. Both inhabitants in the kitchen perked up at once, hearing Peter's excited shout of, "Gil!"

"What's up, little dude?" Gilbert shouted back with just as much gusto.

"Please don't throw the kid this time." came the predictable grumble from Ludwig.

"Why not?" Gilbert and Peter cried in unison. And then they were giggling.

"Boys." Elizabeta mumbled tiredly under her breath.

Feliciano laughed, dour mood instantly forgotten. He finished the onion he'd been cutting and wiped his hands off, "I'll be back in a second!"

"Of course, darling." Elizabeta said.

He quickly turned towards the sitting room, smiling broadly. Ludwig was still in the entrance of the room, shaking his head exasperatedly at his brother who was in the middle of a secret handshake with Peter. Feliciano trotted over to the blond and threw himself at him.

Ludwig caught him on instinct, accustomed to this sort of unexpected affection. After the hug was over, he made sure Feliciano was steady on his feet before releasing him.

"Hey, what's up?" Gilbert asked as he finished up his handshake with Peter.

"Just cooking dinner." Feliciano answered, simultaneously (and stealthily) sliding his hand into Ludwig's. "How are you?"

"I'm awesome!" Gilbert pronounced. He collapsed on the couch, swiping the cube and turning it over in his hands.

Peter followed, "I think I've almost fixed it!"

Gilbert put his feet up on the coffee table, a look of deep contemplation on his face, "I'm not sure about that one, kiddo."

Ludwig squeezed his hand, causing Feliciano to look up. He still looked a bit exasperated, but his relaxed features betrayed his amusement, "How are *you?"*

"Alright." Feliciano answered honestly. Some days were better than others, and Ludwig knew that. But today he really was feeling pretty good, and especially since everyone was coming over for a special occasion.

From the kitchen, Elizabeta yelled, "Gilbert, if I come in there and your feet are on the coffee table-"

"They're not!" Gilbert shouted, quickly removing his feet from the table.

It was good timing. In the next moment, Elizabeta stomped in wielding a cast iron skillet the same way one would handle a sword.

On the couch, Gilbert shuddered, “Jeez, no need to threaten me.”

“Oh, I would never.” Elizabeta said with a mischievous wink at Feliciano.

Another knock at the door interrupted them. Feliciano intercepted Elizabeta when she made to answer it, insisting that she had enough to do already.

Feliciano made his way down a short hallway, welcoming Tino in next.

“How’ve you been!” Tino asked the moment he stepped inside. Behind him, a large, stoic man followed.

Feliciano waved at Berwald, having met the man a time or two. To Tino, he smiled and accepted a short hug, “I’ve been good, thank you.”

He led them inside, smiling faintly at Peter when he charged his parents. Gilbert had propped his feet back on the coffee table, studying the cubed puzzle intently. Ludwig was nowhere to be found.

“Loudmouth.” Tino greeted Gilbert pleasantly to which the albino just scowled. To Peter, he asked, “Have you been good today?”

“The best!” Peter puffed his chest out proudly, smiling at Feliciano for confirmation.

“Peter taught me all about my lefts and rights.” Feliciano said seriously, like he’d learn some incredible new skill.

“I’m glad to hear it.” Tino said, ruffling the boy’s hair proudly.

Peter preened under the attention.

It was a wonderful sight, and Feliciano felt pride flare up in his chest. Sometimes he and Peter went to therapy together, and he had an undeniable soft spot for the boy. It was good to see how well-adjusted he was despite everything he’d been through.

The sitting room steadily grew in volume as Gilbert struck up a conversation with Tino. The volume caused Feliciano to squirm, and he was soon drifting back to the kitchen. He was only mildly surprised to see Ludwig picking up where he left off on the vegetables. Elizabeta was back to humming pleasantly over the stove, the cast iron skillet at the ready beside her.

Without anything to do, Feliciano leaned against the counter next to the blonde with a playful little smile.

Ludwig glanced at him briefly before sighing, “What?”

Feliciano’s smile widened, “I was just thinking about something.”

“And that *something* is?” he asked.

“You.” Feliciano smiled as sweetly as he could, and was rewarded with a deep blush.

“Of course you were.” Ludwig mumbled, making sure to keep his eyes on the vegetables he was cutting. He very carefully averted his eyes, his brow scrunched up in consternation. It made him look so serious, but before Feliciano could tease him for it, Ludwig said, “For the record, I was thinking about you, too.”

Well. That was surprisingly sweet.

“Aren’t you two just the cutest!” Elizabeta cooed.

Feliciano jumped, having forgotten Elizabeta was standing right there. Ironically, he could feel his own face flush in embarrassment. He was quick to get over it, however, jumping up on the counter and swinging his legs to and fro. He’d never pass up an opportunity to tease Ludwig. “Aww, and they say romance is dead!”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.” Ludwig muttered.

Feliciano gasped, putting an offended hand over his chest, “And why not, *caro mio?”*

“Because you never let me hear the end of it.” Ludwig accompanied the response with a particularly harsh chop, the sound echoing off the wooden cabinets.

“Me? Teasing you?” Feliciano said, ignoring the subtle attitude. “Never.”

Ludwig sighed, but didn’t dignify that with a response. He’d moved onto carrots, the harsh chopping fading after a while. His expression had softened, a ghost of a smile on his lips. It was a rare look for him, and even rarer were the next words he breathed, “I was being serious. You’ve seemed happier lately. I’m glad.”

Feliciano could have melted on the spot, and had Ludwig not been holding a very sharp object, he would have crushed him with another hug.

The kitchen lapsed into an easy silence, accompanied only by rhythmic chopping and pleasant gurgling on the stove. Outside, however, Feliciano could hear Gilbert talking loudly about… something. It was hard to make out. Peter was also speaking loudly, just shy of shouting. Tino was reprimanding the boy for the volume, but that only added to the clamorous mix of voices. It made him feel tense, his aversion to busy places having been exacerbated over the last few months of his life.

“I think that’ll do just fine, thank you dear!” Elizabeta said, causing Feliciano to jump as his attention was ripped back to the kitchen.

Ludwig glanced at him worriedly, but didn’t say anything. He helped Elizabeta bring the cut vegetables over the stove, adding them to the swirling liquid. He wiped his hands clean, asking, “Do you need anything else?”

“No, that’s quite alright.” Elizabeta said. “There’s nothing left now but to let it all cook.”

“I can set the table!” Feliciano declared suddenly. He immediately jumped off the counter and pulled the plates from the cabinet.

Ludwig assisted where he could, grabbing the silverware as he was led to the dining room. The abrupt way Feliciano offered his help hadn't escaped his notice, and as they set the table, he asked, "Is it too busy?"

Feliciano nodded, closing his eyes to clear the sudden thrum of anxiety in his chest. He loved being with his friends and family, but so many people in such a cramped space made him tense. It was, as Ludwig said, too busy, and he didn't want to risk an anxiety attack when things had been so smoothe today.

"Will you be okay?" Ludwig asked as he straightened the forks.

"I-I'll be fine." Feliciano responded, and he meant it. He'd be alright, he just needed to be in a quiet environment for a little while.

"When is your brother coming over?" Ludwig asked, swift to move on to lighter topics.

Feliciano was immensely glad for it, "He should be here any minute. He's a fast driver, even if he can be scary."

"As if you're much better," Ludwig quipped.

"I'm a great driver," Feliciano said indignantly. "We make it alive, don't we?"

Ludwig shuddered. "That's not as good of a defense as you think it is."

Feliciano huffed a bit, but let it go. They finished setting the table, Feliciano placing the last glass down when he heard a knock at the door.

"Oh, that must be Lovino!" Elizabeta called from the kitchen.

"I'll get it!" Feliciano yelled, rushing his way to the door.

He passed the sitting room, waving cheerfully at the occupants there. He bolted down the hallway, a smile already on his face as he pulled the door open, "Lovi!"

Lovino nearly jumped at the sudden greeting, but was quick to shake himself out of it. Feliciano attacked him with a hug, causing Lovino to take a step back to steady himself, "Woah, easy there."

Antonio stood behind him, chuckling at the scene, "Yeah, be careful Feli, you might just knock him over!"

"Shut up, no he won't." Lovino growled. Those little comments had been getting under his skin because he was deep in denial. It was clear to everyone that he didn't want to believe it, that there was no way, but it was true. Feliciano was almost taller than him.

The growth spurt started a few months ago, and it wasn't stopping any time soon. A few more months and there was no doubt that Feliciano would stand taller than his older brother, and that pissed Lovino right off.

“Don’t mind him, Feli. He’s just a little *short*-tempered.” Antonio said while poking a fuming Lovino in the side.

Feliciano burst out laughing, and especially when Lovino turned and landed a punch to Antonio’s arm.

“Knock that off, bastard.” Lovino hissed.

“Why don’t you come up here and make me.” Antonio sassed back.

Before Lovino could make a proper argument in return, Elizabeta called from somewhere in the house, “Don’t just stand out there, come in!”

Feliciano ushered them inside, walking them down the hallway to the sitting room. He could feel Lovino’s nerves radiating off of him and he wondered if Antonio noticed.

Tino waved pleasantly to them from his place on an armchair while Berwald hardly spared them a glance, too busy keeping Peter from jumping off the walls. Gilbert waved excitedly, and Elizabeta descended on Lovino for a short hug.

“Get off of me, hag!” Lovino whined, but his struggle didn’t seem all that sincere.

“Oh, hush you.” Elizabeta said, rounding on Antonio with a much more consensual hug.

Ludwig emerged nervously from the dining room, watching Lovino like how one would watch a rabid dog. While not openly malicious, Lovino still had an impressive protective streak. Ludwig, while not quite on his shitlist, didn’t rank highly on his *people I tolerate* list.

“Potato-bastards.” Lovino greeted both Ludwig and Gilbert together. That was a pretty docile greeting all things considered. Probably because Peter was there.

“What’s up, dude!” Gilbert replied, completely unphased. “How was the trip?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Lovino grumbled.

Antonio rolled his eyes, “It was nice, thank you. Hopefully we can go back after we move.”

That was another positive change. Antonio and Lovino had recently bought a modest house outside of the city. It was a larger space, and a nicer one too. It was everything Feliciano could have hoped for his family.

“Alright, I think that’s everyone!” Elizabeta clapped her hands excitedly together.

Gilbert raised an eyebrow at her, “What, the stupid librarian couldn’t grace us with his presence tonight?”

Elizabeta’s smile soured ever so slightly, “We’re taking a break, but that is of no concern to you.”

Feliciano almost laughed at the way Gilbert perked up, sitting up straighter and even running a hand through his hair to lay it flat. Ludwig seemed rather amused as well, exchanging a sly smile with Feliciano.

“Alright, everyone come find a seat!” Elizabeta said, leading the charge to the dining room.

Feliciano hung back, standing close to Lovino. Antonio had gone slightly ahead, out of earshot. Feliciano smirked, “You’re nervous.”

“Is it obvious?” Lovino asked, suddenly looking ill. “I don’t know how the idiot hasn’t noticed.”

“Not too obvious.” Feliciano answered truthfully. “I think Miss Elizabeta’s about to explode from excitement, though.”

“I shouldn’t have told the hag.” Lovino grumbled to himself. “I swear, if she lets something slip-”

“Let what slip?” Antonio asked.

Both Lovino and Feliciano jumped, looking up to see Antonio smiling confusedly at them. Behind him, Elizabeta was trying to contain her laughter.

“Nothing!” Lovino shouted just a bit too loud, a bit too quick. “Just go get us a seat, bastard!”

Antonio shrugged and walked away. Lovino and Feliciano shared a simultaneous sigh of relief.

“Christ.” Lovino dragged a shaky hand through his hair. He couldn’t get any more words out, his voice overtaken by nerves.

Feliciano patted his brother’s shoulder sympathetically, leading him to the dining room. Gilbert had chosen the seat closest to Elizabeta, who was sitting at the head of the table. Ludwig sat on the other side of him which left an open seat next to him, which Feliciano promptly took. Peter clambered into the seat to the left of him while Antonio and Lovino sat directly facing him on the other side. Tino and Berwald filed into the remaining seats, starting up a lively conversation with Gilbert.

On the table was a hearty beef stew. It was relatively cheap to make and easy to prepare for a large gathering of people, and with Elizabeta’s permission, the group dug in with gusto.

Feliciano savored the delectable food, going through as many bread rolls as he could stomach. His appetite, which he thought had been gone forever, was slowly beginning to return. While probably still on the skinny side he’d made remarkable progress in his relationship with food.

The meal didn’t last long, it simply tasted too good. Feliciano helped clear the table, depositing the dishes in the sink to be cleaned later. Gilbert was trying to compliment Elizabeta’s cooking, but the woman saw right through the brazen attempt at flirting and dismissed him. Ludwig was humming along to some story Tino was telling while Antonio

was in an intense match of rock-paper-scissors with Peter. As for Lovino… well, quite frankly, he looked like he was about to throw up.

Feliciano smirked as he took his seat. It was time.

Lovino cleared his throat, immediately gaining the attention of the entire room. Elizabeta sneakily pulled her phone up to record.

“Shit.” Lovino mumbled, never doing well under the scrutiny of others. He physically shook himself out of it, taking a deep breath. When he looked up again, his face was set in determination. “Okay, I’m not going to pretend like I’m the best at this sort of thing, so you’re going to have to bear with me.”

Antonio smiled warmly, if not confusedly.

It seemed to give Lovino strength. He turned his body towards his boyfriend, his face exploding in a deep scarlet hue, “When we met each other, you pissed me off more than anyone I had ever met.”

Gilbert snorted, but was silenced by a harsh thwack to the head courtesy of Elizabeta.

“You always had this dumb smile on your face. No matter what I said, or how bad I hurt your feelings, you’d come back the next day with that stupid smile.”

Antonio reached up to take his hand.

Lovino gripped it tight, “Then one day you stopped smiling. I didn’t know it at the time, but I would look forward to seeing your dumbass smile every day. It made things feel not so bad for a while.” He paused for a moment, taking in a calming breath before saying, “You were always there for me whether you knew it or not, and I don’t think I ever thanked you before.”

“You don’t have to thank me, Lovi.” Antonio whispered, like he’d forgotten they had a captive audience hanging off their every word.

“Bullshit.” Lovino mumbled, his voice wobbling. “I could’ve been better to you, but we both know how shit I am at making friends. But we somehow figured out how to talk long enough to go on a date. I know I give you shit for how nervous you were, but honestly, I’d never been more scared in my life. I was scared because I realized how much you meant to me, and I still feel that way sometimes.”

Feliciano watched his brother dig around in his pocket, and he had to put a hand over his mouth to contain himself.

“After everything we went through, I really can’t stand the thought of you ever leaving me, so I thought I’d do something drastic.” Lovino tried to smile, but his anxiety was still very much apparent.

Antonio nodded along, still not picking up what was about to happen. But then, Lovino was on one knee and Antonio’s expression turned to one of utter disbelief.

“Christ, I’m really not good at this, but I love you so… Antonio,” he said, holding up a simple golden ring, “will you marry me?”

They stayed like that, suspended in silence for a few, impossibly long moments. Antonio wasn’t breathing, his mouth slightly ajar, eyes slowly beginning to water. And then he dropped to his knees, pulling Lovino into a bone-crushing hug.

“Oh my God!” Feliciano yelled, but his voice was drowned out by Gilbert’s nonsensical shout of excitement. Elizabeta was laughing cheerfully as Tino started bouncing in his seat next to a stoic, yet somehow happy-looking, Berwald. Ludwig mumbled something that vaguely sounded like *congratulations* as Peter looked on rather indifferently.

Still kneeling on the ground, Antonio had yet to relinquish his grip on Lovino. Over the sound of chaos, Feliciano heard his brother squeak out, “So is that a yes?”

“Of course!” Antonio yelled, capturing the room’s attention. He kissed Lovino on the lips, and when he pulled away, there were tears gathered on his cheeks. “Oh my God, *of course* it’s a yes, Lovi!”

“Thank God.” Lovino breathed, his body sagging with relief.

Feliciano laughed, watching his brother and Antonio collect themselves enough to return to their seats. Elizabeta disappeared briefly before returning with a bottle of champagne. She was careful to pop the cork in a controlled way before pouring everyone (sans Peter) a drink. Feliciano sipped at his, knowing he probably shouldn’t be drinking, but who cared? His brother was *engaged,* rules be damned!

“It was a bitch and a half to get your ring size, you know.” Lovino grumbled while Antonio tried the ring on.

“It’s perfect, Lovi!” Antonio squealed, flaunting the new jewelry with zeal. “Oh, does this mean I get to plan a wedding? I’ve always wanted to do that!”

“I want to help!” Feliciano yelled excitedly. “What kind of flowers do you want? Oh, and what music? You’ll have to think about the type of food, too! And the guest list, and we’ll have to hire a photographer, and-”

“Calm down!” Lovino laughed, and it sounded so *genuine.* “We can’t plan the whole thing tonight, although I know you want to.”

“Hey, I’m invited, right?” Gilbert asked, literally buzzing where he sat in his excitement.

“Depends on how annoying you are between now and then.” Lovino said, but it was clear he was joking. He’d been the one to invite everyone over, after all.

“Whose name are you taking?” Berwald surprisingly asked.

Feliciano turned his attention back to his brother, also anticipating the answer. Silence had descended on them again as Lovino and Antonio simply stared at each other.

“Well…” Lovino trailed off nervously. “I mean, you don’t really like your family name, and I sure as hell hate mine, so I thought maybe we could change it to Vargas.”

Antonio looked momentarily shocked, but then the words registered. He smiled, all warmth and overwhelming love. “I think that would be perfect.”

Feliciano settled comfortably at Ludwig’s side, resting his head on the blond’s shoulder. The evening descended upon them like a blanket, but nobody moved to retire on a night so perfect. Even Peter, who could care less about such adult matters, was loath to abandon such a cheerful environment filled with friends and goodwill.

Their story hadn’t begun on the happiest note, but it would end on one. And as Feliciano cast his gaze around the cozy little room, he realized something:

Life had never been better than in this moment.

END

Chapter End Notes

4 years I've been writing this fic, and it's finally done.

I don't know what to say except thank you. Everyone who is still reading this or who will read this, thank you for making this one of best things I've ever been a part of. I'm crying as I write this, just thank you so much.

I'm still writing other things and may add a few oneshots that tie into this fic, so if you're interested, feel free to hang around :)

Otherwise, it's been good everyone. Love you guys so much.

Till next time :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!